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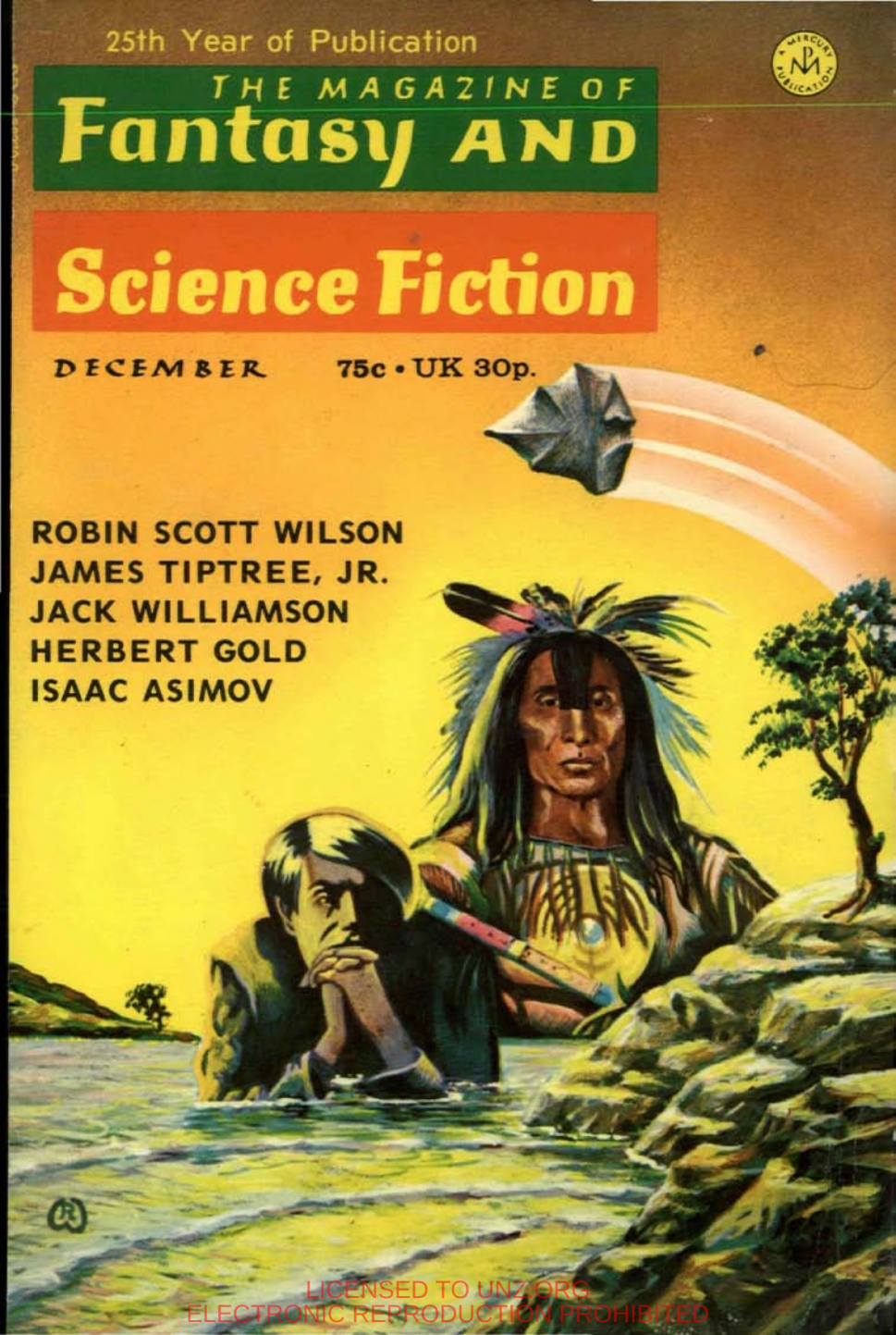
ROBIN SCOTT WILSON
JAMES TIPTREE, JR.
JACK WILLIAMSON
HERBERT GOLD
ISAAC ASIMOV



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction

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Edward L. Ferman, EDITOR & PUBLISHER — Isaac Asimov, SCIENCE EDITOR

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James Tiptree calls himself "an amateur — I don't write to eat." Exactly what Mr. Tiptree does to eat remains unknown, however he tells us: "I do not, repeat it, work for the CIA, the FBI, NSA, the Treasury, the narcs or the Metropolitan Park Police." Well, sf people are a nosy bunch, and we won't give up, but meanwhile there is more than enough to consider in Mr. Tiptree's fiction. It includes perhaps thirty stories published during the last five years, a consistently high quality and inventive body of work which has earned him a reputation as one of the major new voices in science fiction.

The Women Men Don't See

by JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

I see her first while the Mexicana 727 is barreling down to Cozumel Island. I come out of the can and lurch into her seat, saying "Sorry," at a double female blur. The near blur nods quietly. The younger one in the window seat goes on looking out. I continue down the aisle, registering nothing. Zero. I never would have looked at them or thought of them again.

Cozumel airport is the usual mix of panicky Yanks dressed for the sand pile and calm Mexicans dressed for lunch at the Presidente. I am a used-up Yank dressed for serious fishing; I extract my rods and duffel from the riot and hike across the field to find my charter pilot. One Captain Estéban has contracted to deliver me to the bonefish flats of Bélise three hundred kilometers down the coast.

Captain Estéban turns out to be four feet nine of mahogany Maya *puro*. He is also in a somber Maya snit. He tells me my Cessna is grounded somewhere and his Bonanza is booked to take a party to Chetumal.

Well, Chetumal is south; can he take me along and go on to Bélise after he drops them? Gloomily he concedes the possibility — *if* the other party permits, and *if* there are not too many *equipajes*.

The Chetumal party approaches. It's the woman and her young companion — daughter? — neatly picking their way across the gravel and yucca apron. Their Ventura two-suiters, like themselves, are small, plain and neutral-colored. No problem.

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When the captain asks if I may ride along, the mother says mildly "Of course," without looking at me.

I think that's when my inner tilt-detector sends up its first faint click. How come this woman has already looked me over carefully enough to accept on her plane? I disregard it. Paranoia hasn't been useful in my business for years, but the habit is hard to break.

As we clamber into the Bonanza, I see the girl has what could be an attractive body if there was any spark at all. There isn't. Captain Estéban folds a serape to sit on so he can see over the cowling and runs a meticulous check-down. And then we're up and trundling over the turquoise Jello of the Caribbean into a stiff south wind.

The coast on our right is the territory of Quintana Roo. If you haven't seen Yucatan, imagine the world's biggest absolutely flat green-grey rug. An empty-looking land. We pass the white ruin of Tulum and the gash of the road to Chichen Itza, a half-dozen coconut plantations, and then nothing but reef and low scrub jungle all the way to the horizon, just about the way the conquistadores saw it four centuries back.

Long strings of cumulus are racing at us, shadowing the coast. I have gathered that part of our pilot's gloom concerns the weather. A cold front is dying on the henequen fields of Mérida to west, and the south wind has piled up a string of coastal storms: what they call *llovisnas*. Estéban detours methodically around a couple of small thunderheads. The Bonanza jinks, and I look back with a vague notion of reassuring the women. They are calmly intent on what can be seen of Yucatan. Well, they were offered the copilot's view, but they turned it down. Too shy?

Another *llovisna* puffs up ahead. Estéban takes the Bonanza upstairs, rising in his seat to sight his course. I relax for the first time in too long, savoring the latitudes between me and my desk, the week of fishing ahead. Our captain's classic Maya profile attracts my gaze: forehead sloping back from his predatory nose, lips and jaw stepping back below it. If his slant eyes had been any more crossed, he couldn't have made his license. That's a handsome combination, believe it or not. On the little Maya chicks in their minishifts with iridescent gloop on those cockeyes, it's also highly erotic. Nothing like the oriental doll thing; these people have stone bones. Captain Estéban's old grandmother could probably tow the Bonanza...

I'm snapped awake by the cabin hitting my ear. Estéban is barking into his headset over a drumming racket of hail; the windows are dark grey.

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One important noise is missing — the motor. I realize Estéban is fighting a dead plane. Thirty-six hundred; we've lost two thousand feet!

He slaps tank switches as the storm throws us around; I catch something about *gasolina* in a snarl that shows his big teeth. The Bonanza reels down. As he reaches for an overhead toggle, I see the fuel gauges are high. Maybe a clogged gravity feed line; I've heard of dirty gas down here. He drops the set. It's a million to one nobody can read us through the storm at this range anyway. Twenty-five hundred — going down.

His electric feed pump seems to have cut in: the motor explodes — quits — explodes — and quits again for good. We are suddenly out of the bottom of the clouds. Below us is a long white line almost hidden by rain: The reef. But there isn't any beach behind it, only a big meandering bay with a few mangrove flats — and it's coming up at us fast.

This is going to be bad, I tell myself with great unoriginality. The women behind me haven't made a sound. I look back and see they're braced down with their coats by their heads. With a stalling speed around eighty, all this isn't much use, but I wedge myself in.

Estéban yells some more into his set, flying a falling plane. He is doing one jesus job, too — as the water rushes up at us he dives into a hair-raising turn and hangs us into the wind — with a long pale ridge of sandbar in front of our nose.

Where in hell he found it I never know. The Bonanza mushes down, and we belly-hit with a tremendous tearing crash — bounce — hit again — and everything slews wildly as we flat-spin into the mangroves at the end of the bar. Crash! Clang! The plane is wrapping itself into a mound of strangler fig with one wing up. The crashing quits with us all in one piece. And no fire. Fantastic.

Captain Estéban prys open his door, which is now in the roof. Behind me a woman is repeating quietly. "Mother. Mother." I climb up the floor and find the girl trying to free herself from her mother's embrace. The woman's eyes are closed. Then she opens them and suddenly lets go, sane as soap. Estéban starts hauling them out. I grab the Bonanza's aid kit and scramble out after them into brilliant sun and wind. The storm that hit us is already vanishing up the coast.

"Great landing, Captain."

"Oh, *yes!* It was beautiful." The women are shaky, but no hysteria. Estéban is surveying the scenery with the expression his ancestors used on the Spaniards.

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If you've been in one of these things, you know the slow-motion inanity that goes on. Euphoria, first. We straggle down the fig tree and out onto the sandbar in the roaring hot wind, noting without alarm that there's nothing but miles of crystalline water on all sides. It's only a foot or so deep, and the bottom is the olive color of silt. The distant shore around us is all flat mangrove swamp, totally uninhabitable.

"Bahia Espiritu Santo." Estéban confirms my guess that we're down in that huge water wilderness. I always wanted to fish it.

"What's all that smoke?" The girl is pointing at the plumes blowing around the horizon.

"Alligator hunters," says Estéban. Maya poachers have left burn-offs in the swamps. It occurs to me that any signal fires we make aren't going to be too conspicuous. And I now note that our plane is well-buried in the mound of fig. Hard to see it from the air.

Just as the question of how the hell we get out of here surfaces in my mind, the older woman asks composedly, "If they didn't hear you, Captain, when will they start looking for us? Tomorrow?"

"Correct," Estéban agrees dourly. I recall that air-sea rescue is fairly informal here. Like, keep an eye open for Mario, his mother says he hasn't been home all week.

It dawns on me we may be here quite some while.

Furthermore, the diesel-truck noise on our left is the Caribbean piling back into the mouth of the bay. The wind is pushing it at us, and the bare bottoms on the mangroves show that our bar is covered at high tide. I recall seeing a full moon this morning in — believe it, St. Louis — which means maximal tides. Well, we can climb up in the plane. But what about drinking water?

There's a small splat! behind me. The older woman has sampled the bay. She shakes her head, smiling ruefully. It's the first real expression on either of them; I take it as the signal for introductions. When I say I'm Don Fenton from St. Louis, she tells me their name is Parsons, from Bethesda, Maryland. She says it so nicely I don't at first notice we aren't being given first names. We all compliment Captain Estéban again.

His left eye is swelled shut, an inconvenience beneath his attention as a Maya, but Mrs. Parsons spots the way he's bracing his elbow in his ribs.

"You're hurt, Captain."

"*Roto* — I think is broken." He's embarrassed at being in pain. We get him to peel off his Jaime shirt, revealing a nasty bruise in his superb dark-bay torso.

"Is there tape in that kit, Mr.

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Fenton? I've had a little first-aid training."

She begins to deal competently and very impersonally with the tape. Miss Parsons and I wander to the end of the bar and have a conversation which I am later to recall acutely.

"Roseate spoonbills," I tell her as three pink birds flap away.

"They're beautiful," she says in her tiny voice. They both have tiny voices. "He's a Mayan Indian, isn't he? The pilot, I mean."

"Right. The real thing, straight out of the Bonampak murals. Have you seen Chichén and Uxmal?"

"Yes. We were in Mérida. We're going to Tikal in Guatemala ...I mean, we were."

"You'll get there." It occurs to me the girl needs cheering up. "Have they told you that Maya mothers used to tie a board on the infant's forehead to get that slant? They also hung a ball of tallow over its nose to make its eyes cross. It was considered aristocratic."

She smiles and takes another peak at Estéban. "People seem different in Yucatan," she says thoughtfully. "Not like the Indians around Mexico City. More, I don't know, independent."

"Comes from never having been conquered. Mayas got massacred and chased a lot, but nobody ever really flattened them. I bet you didn't know that the last Mexican-Maya war ended with a negotiated truce in nineteen thirty-five?"

"No!" Then she says seriously, "I like that."

"So do I."

"The water is really rising very fast," says Mrs. Parsons gently from behind us.

It is, and so is another *llovisna.* We climb back into the Bonanza. I try to rig my parka for a rain catcher, which blows loose as the storm hits fast and furious. We sort a couple of malt bars and my bottle of Jack Daniels out of the jumble in the cabin and make ourselves reasonably comfortable. The Parsons take a sip of whiskey each, Estéban and I considerably more. The Bonanza begins to bump soggily. Estéban makes an ancient one-eyed Maya face at the water seeping into his cabin and goes to sleep. We all nap.

When the water goes down, the euphoria has gone with it, and we're very, very thirsty. It's also damn near sunset. I get to work with a bait-casting rod and some treble hooks and manage to foul-hook four small mullets. Estéban and the women tie the Bonanza's midget life raft out in the mangroves to catch rain. The wind is parching hot. No planes go by.

Finally another shower comes over and yields us six ounces of water apiece. When the sunset

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envelopes the world in golden smoke, we squat on the sandbar to eat wet raw mullet and Instant Breakfast crumbs. The women are now in shorts, neat but definitely not sexy.

"I never realized how refreshing raw fish is," Mrs. Parsons says pleasantly. Her daughter chuckles, also pleasantly. She's on Mamma's far side away from Esteban and me. I have Mrs. Parsons figured now: Mother Hen protecting only chick from male predators. That's all right with me. I came here to fish.

But something is irritating me. The damn women haven't complained once, you understand. Not a peep, not a quaver, no personal manifestations whatever. They're like something out of a manual.

"You really seem at home in the wilderness, Mrs. Parsons. You do much camping?"

"Oh goodness no." Diffident laugh. "Not since my girl scout days. Oh, look — are those man-of-war birds?"

Answer a question with a question. I wait while the frigate birds sail nobly into the sunset.

"Bethesda...Would I be wrong in guessing you work for Uncle Sam?"

"Why, yes. You must be very familiar with Washington, Mr. Fenton. Does your work bring you there often?"

Anywhere but on our sandbar and we do enjoy fresh air."

the little ploy would have worked. My hunter's gene twitches.

"Which agency are you with?"

She gives up gracefully. "Oh, just GSA records. I'm a librarian."

Of course, I know her now, all the Mrs. Parsonses in records divisions, accounting sections, research branches, personnel and administration offices. Tell Mrs. Parsons we need a recap on the external service contracts for fiscal '73. So Yucatan is on the tours now? Pity...I offer her the tired little joke. "You know where the bodies are buried."

She smiles deprecatingly and stands up. "It does get dark quickly, doesn't it?"

Time to get back into the plane.

A flock of ibis are circling us, evidently accustomed to roosting in our fig tree. Estéban produces a machete and a Maya hammock. He proceeds to sling it between tree and plane, refusing help. His machete stroke is noticeably tentative.

The Parsons are taking a pee behind the tail vane. I hear one of them slip and squeal faintly. When they come back over the hull, Mrs. Parsons asks, "Might we sleep in the hammock, Captain?"

Estéban splits an unbelieving grin. I protest about rain and mosquitoes.

"Oh, we have insect repellent

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The air is rushing by about force five and colder by the minute.

"We have our raincoats," the girl adds cheerfully.

Well, okay, ladies. We dangerous males retire inside the damp cabin. Through the wind I hear the women laugh softly now and then, apparently cosy in their chilly ibis roost. A private insanity, I decide. I know myself for the least threatening of men; my non-charisma has been in fact an asset jobwise, over the years. Are they having fantasies about Estéban? Or maybe they really are fresh-air nuts...Sleep comes for me in invisible diesels roaring by on the reef outside.

We emerge dry-mouthed into a vast windy salmon sunrise. A diamond chip of sun breaks out of the sea and promptly submerges in cloud. I go to work with the rod and some mullet bait while two showers detour around us. Breakfast is a strip of wet barracuda apiece.

The Parsons continue stoic and helpful. Under Estéban's direction they set up a section of cowling for a gasoline flare in case we hear a plane, but nothing goes over except one unseen jet droning toward Panama. The wind howls, hot and dry and full of coral dust. So are we.

"They look first in the sea," Estéban remarks. His aristocratic frontal slope is beaded with sweat; Mrs. Parsons watches him concernedly. I watch the cloud blanket tearing by above, getting higher and dryer and thicker. While that lasts nobody is going to find us, and the water business is now unfunny.

Finally I borrow Estéban's machete and hack a long light pole. There's stream coming in there, I saw it from the plane. Can't be more than two, three miles."

"I'm afraid the raft's torn." Mrs. Parsons shows me the cracks in the orange plastic; irritatingly, it's a Delaware label.

"All right," I hear myself announce. "The tide's going down. If we cut the good end of that air tube, I can haul water back in it. I've waded flats before."

Even to me it sounds crazy.

"Stay by plane," Estéban says. He's right, of course. He's also clearly running a fever. I look at the overcast and taste grit and old barracuda. The hell with the manual.

When I start cutting up the raft, Estéban tells me to take the serape. "You stay one night." He's right about that, too; I'll have to wait out the tide.

"I'll come with you," says Mrs. Parsons calmly.

I simply stare at her. What new madness has got into Mother Hen? Does she imagine Estéban is too battered to be functional? While I'm being astounded, my eyes take in the fact that Mrs. Parsons is now

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quite rosy around the knees, with her hair loose and a sunburn starting on her nose. A trim, in fact a very neat shading-forty.

"Look, that stuff is horrible going. Mud up to your ears and water over your head."

"I'm really quite fit and I swim a great deal. I'll try to keep up. Two would be much safer, Mr. Fenton, and we can bring more water."

She's serious. Well, I'm about as fit as a marshmallow at this time of winter, and I can't pretend I'm depressed by the idea of company. So be it.

"Let me show Miss Parsons how to work this rod."

Miss Parsons is even rosier and more windblown, and she's not clumsy with my tackle. A good girl, Miss Parsons, in her nothing way. We cut another staff and get some gear together. At the last minute Esteban shows how sick he feels: he offers me the machete. I thank him, but, no; I'm used to my Wirkkala knife. We tie some air into the plastic tube for a float and set out along the sandiest looking line.

Estéban raises one dark palm. *"Buen viaje."* Miss Parsons has hugged her mother and gone to cast from the mangrove. She waves. We wave.

An hour later we're barely out of waving distance. The going is purely god-awful. The sand keeps dissolving into silt you can't walk on or swim through, and the bottom is spiked with dead mangrove spears. We flounder from one pothole to the next, scaring up rays and turtles and hoping to god we don't kick a moray eel. Where we're not soaked in slime, we're desiccated, and we smell like the Old Cretaceous.

Mrs. Parsons keeps up doggedly. I only have to pull her out once. When I do so, I notice the sandbar is now out of sight.

Finally we reach the gap in the mangrove line I thought was the creek. It turns out to open into another arm of the bay, with more mangroves ahead. And the tide is coming in.

"I've had the world's lousiest idea."

Mrs. Parsons only says mildly, "It's so different from the view from the plane."

I revise my opinion of the girl scouts, and we plow on past the mangroves toward the smoky haze that has to be shore. The sun is setting in our faces, making it hard to see. Ibises and herons fly up around us, and once a big hermit spooks ahead, his fin cutting a rooster tail. We fall into more potholes. The flashlights get soaked. I am having fantasies of the mangrove as universal obstacle; it's hard to recall I ever walked down a street, for instance, without stumbling over or under or through

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mangrove roots. And the sun is dropping, down, down.

Suddenly we hit a ledge and fall over it into a cold flow.

"The stream! It's fresh water!"

We guzzle and gargle and douse our heads; it's the best drink I remember. "Oh my, oh my —!" Mrs. Parsons is laughing right out loud.

"That dark place over to the right looks like real land."

We flounder across the flow and follow a hard shelf, which turns into solid bank and rises over our heads. Shortly there's a break beside a clump of spiny bromels, and we scramble up and flop down at the top, dripping and stinking. Out of sheer reflex my arms goes around my companion's shoulder — but Mrs. Parsons isn't there; she's up on her knees peering at the burnt-over plain around us.

"Its so good to see land one can walk on!" The tone is too innocent. *Noli me tangere.*

"Don't try it." I'm exasperated; the muddy little woman, what does she think? "That ground out there is a crust of ashes over muck, and it's full of stubs. You can go in over your knees."

"It seems firm here."

"We're in an alligator nursery. That was the slide we came up. Don't worry, by now the old lady's doubtless on her way to be made into handbags."

"What a shame."

"I better set a line down in the stream while I can still see."

I slide back down and rig a string of hooks that may get us breakfast. When I get back Mrs. Parsons is wringing muck out of the serape.

"I'm glad you warned me, Mr. Fenton. It *is* treacherous."

"Yeah." I'm over my irritation; god knows I don't want to *tangere* Mrs. Parsons, even if I weren't beat down to mush. "In its quiet way, Yucatan is a tough place to get around in. You can see why the Mayas built roads. Speaking of which — look!"

The last of the sunset is silhouetting a small square shape a couple of kilometers inland: a Maya *ruina* with a fig tree growing out of it.

"Lot of those around. People think they were guard towers."

"What a deserted-feeling land."

"Let's hope it's deserted by mosquitoes."

We slump down in the 'gator nursery and share the last malt bar, watching the stars slide in and out of the blowing clouds. The bugs aren't too bad; maybe the burn did them in. And it isn't hot any more, either — in fact, it's not even warm, wet as we are. Mrs. Parsons continues tranquilly interested in Yucatan and unmistakably uninterested in togetherness.

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Just as I'm beginning to get aggressive notions about how we're going to spend the night if she expects me to give her the serape, she stands up, scuffs at a couple of hummocks and says, "I expect this is as good a place as any, isn't it, Mr. Fenton?"

With which she spreads out the raft bag for a pillow and lies down on her side in the dirt with exactly half the serape over her and the other corner folded neatly open. Her small back is toward me.

The demonstration is so convincing that I'm halfway under my share of serape before the preposterousness of it stops me.

"By the way. My name is Don."

"Oh, of course." Her voice is graciousness itself. "I'm Ruth."

I get in not quite touching her, and we lie there like two fish on a plate, exposed to the stars and smelling the smoke in the wind and feeling things underneath us. It is absolutely the most intimately awkward moment I've had in years.

The woman doesn't mean one thing to me, but the obtrusive recessiveness of her, the defiance of her little rump eight inches from my fly — for two pesos I'd have those shorts down and introduce myself. If I were twenty years younger. If I wasn't so bushed...But the twenty years and the exhaustion are there, and it comes to me wryly that Mrs. Ruth Parsons has judged things to a nicety. If I *were* twenty years younger, she wouldn't be here. Like the butterfish that float around a sated barracuda, only to vanish away the instant his intent changes, Mrs. Parsons knows her little shorts are safe. Those firmly filled little shorts, so close...

A warm nerve stirs in my groin — and just as it does I become aware of a silent emptiness beside me. Mrs. Parsons is imperceptibly inching away. Did my breathing change? Whatever, I'm perfectly sure that if my hand reached, she'd be elsewhere — probably announcing her intention to take a dip. The twenty years bring a chuckle to my throat, and I relax.

"Good night, Ruth."

"Good night, Don."

And believe it or not, we sleep, while the armadas of the wind roar overhead.

Light wakes me — a cold white glare.

My first thought is 'gator hunters. Best to manifest ourselves as *turistas* as fast as possible. I scramble up, noting that Ruth has dived under the bromel clump.

"*Quien estas? A secorro!* Help, *senores!*"

No answer except the light goes out, leaving me blind.

I yell some more in a couple of languages. It stays dark. There's a vague scrabbling, whistling sound somewhere in the burn-off. Liking

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everything less by the minute, I try a speech about our plane having crashed and we need help.

A very narrow pencil of light flicks over us and snaps off.

"Eh-ep," says a blurry voice and something metallic twitters. They for sure aren't locals. I'm getting unpleasant ideas.

"Yes, help!"

Something goes crackle-crackle whish-whish, and all sounds fade away.

"What the holy hell!" I stumble toward where they were.

"Look." Ruth whispers behind me. "Over by the ruin."

I look and catch a multiple flicker which winks out fast.

"A camp?"

And I take two more blind strides; my leg goes down through the crust, and a spike spears me just where you stick the knife in to unjoint a drumstick. By the pain that goes through my bladder I recognize that my trick kneecap has caught it.

For instant basket case you can't beat kneecaps. First you discover your knee doesn't bend any more, and so you try putting some weight on it, and a bayonet goes up your spine and unhinges your jaw. Little grains of gristle have got into the sensitive bearing surface. The knee tries to buckle and can't, and mercifully you fall down.

Ruth helps me back to the serape.

"What a fool, what a god-forgotten imbecile —"

"Not at all, Don. It was perfectly natural." We strike matches; her fingers push mine aside, exploring. "I think it's in place, but it's swelling fast. I'll lay a wet handkerchief on it. We'll have to wait for morning to check the cut. Were they poachers, do you think?"

"Probably," I lie. What I think they were is smugglers.

She comes back with a soaked bandanna and drapes it on. "We must have frightened them. That light...it seemed so bright."

"Some hunting party. People do crazy things around here."

"Perhaps they'll come back in the morning."

"Could be."

Ruth pulls up the wet serape, and we say goodnight again. Neither of us are mentioning how we're going to get back to the plane without help.

I lie staring south where Alpha Centauri is blinking in and out of the overcast and cursing myself for the sweet mess I've made. My first idea is giving way to an even less pleasing one.

Smuggling, around here, is a couple of guys in an outboard meeting a shrimp boat by the reef. They don't light up the sky or have

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some kind of swamp buggy that goes whoosh. Plus a big camp... paramilitary-type equipment?

I've seen a report of Guévarista infiltrators operating on the British Honduran border, which is about a hundred kilometers — sixty miles — south of here. Right under those clouds. If that's what looked us over, I'll be more than happy if they don't come back...

I wake up in pelting rain, alone. My first move confirms that my leg is as expected — a giant misplaced erection bulging out of my shorts. I raise up painfully to see Ruth standing by the bromels, looking over the bay. Solid wet nimbus is pouring out of the south.

"No planes today."

"Oh, good morning, Don. Should we look at that cut now?"

"It's minimal." In fact the skin is hardly broken, and no deep puncture. Totally out of proportion to the havoc inside.

"Well, they have water to drink," Ruth says tranquilly. "Maybe those hunters will come back. I'll go see if we have a fish — that is, can I help you in any way, Don?"

Very tactful. I emit an ungracious negative, and she goes off about her private concerns.

They certainly are private, too; when I recover from my own sanitary efforts, she's still away. Finally I hear splashing.

"It's a big fish!" More splashing. Then she climbs up the bank with a three-pound mangrove snapper — and something else.

It isn't until after the messy work of filleting the fish that I begin to notice.

She's making a smudge of chaff and twigs to singe the fillets, small hands very quick, tension in that female upper lip. The rain has eased off for the moment; we're sluicing wet but warm enough. Ruth brings me my fish on a mangrove skewer and sits back on her heels with an odd breathy sigh.

"Aren't you joining me?"

"Oh, of course." She gets a strip and picks at it, saying quickly, "We either have too much salt or too little, don't we? I should fetch some brine." Her eyes are roving from nothing to noplace.

"Good thought." I hear another sigh and decide the girl scouts need an assist. "Your daughter mentioned you've come from Mérida. Seen much of Mexico?"

"Not really. Last year we went to Mazatlan and Cuernavaca..." She puts the fish down, frowning.

"And you're going to see Tikal. Going to Bonampak too?"

"No." Suddenly she jumps up brushing rain off her face. "I'll bring you some water, Don."

She ducks down the slide, and after a fair while comes back with a full bromel stalk.

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"Thanks." She's standing above me, staring restlessly round the horizon. "

"Ruth, I hate to say it, but those guys are not coming back and it's probably just as well. Whatever they were up to, we looked like trouble. The most they'll do is tell someone we're here. That'll take a day or two to get around, we'll be back at the plane by then."

"I'm sure you're right, Don." She wanders over to the smudge fire.

"And quit fretting about your daughter. She's a big girl."

"Oh, I'm sure Althea's all right...They have plenty of water now." Her fingers drum on her thigh. It's raining again.

"Come on, Ruth. Sit down. Tell me about Althea. Is she still in college?"

She gives that sighing little laugh and sits. "Althea got her degree last year. She's in computer programming."

"I'm in Foreign Procurement Archives." She smiles mechanically, but her breathing is shallow. "It's very interesting."

"I know a Jack Wittig in Contracts, maybe you know him?"

It sounds pretty absurd, there in the 'gator slide.

"Oh, I've met Mr. Wittig. I'm sure he wouldn't remember me."

"Why not?"

"I'm not very memorable."

Her voice is purely factual. She's perfectly right, of course. Who was that woman, Mrs. Jannings, Janny, who coped with my per diem for years? Competent, agreeable, impersonal. She had a sick father or something. But dammit, Ruth is a lot younger and better-looking. Comparatively speaking.

"Maybe Mrs. Parsons doesn't want to be memorable."

She makes a vague sound, and I suddenly realize Ruth isn't listening to me at all. Her hands are clenched around her knees, she's staring inland at the ruin.

"Ruth, I tell you our friends with the light are in the next county by now. Forget it, we don't need them."

Her eyes come back to me as if she'd forgotten I was there, and she nods slowly. It seems to be too much effort to speak. Suddenly she cocks her head and jumps up again.

"I'll go look at the line, Don. I thought I heard something —" She's gone like a rabbit.

While she's away I try getting up onto my good leg and the staff. The pain is sickening; knees seem to have some kind of hot line to the stomach. I take a couple of hops to test whether the Demerol I have in my belt would get me walking. As I do so, Ruth comes up the bank with a fish flapping in her hands.

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"Oh, no, Don! *No!*" She actually clasps the snapper to her breast.

"The water will take some of my weight. I'd like to give it a try."

"You mustn't!" Ruth says quite violently and instantly modulates down. "Look at the bay, Don. One can't see a thing."

I teeter there, tasting bile and looking at the mingled curtains of sun and rain driving across the water. She's right, thank god. Even with two good legs we could get into trouble out there.

"I guess one more night won't kill us."

I let her collapse me back onto the gritty plastic, and she positively bustles around, finding me a chunk to lean on, stretching the serape on both staffs to keep rain off me, bringing another drink, grubbing for dry tinder.

"I'll make us a real bonfire as soon as it lets up, Don. They'll see our smoke, they'll know we're all right. We just have to wait." Cheery smile. "Is there any way we can make you more comfortable?"

Holy Saint Sterculius: playing house in a mud puddle. For a fatuous moment I wonder if Mrs. Parsons has designs on me. And then she lets out another sigh and sinks back onto her heels with that listening look. Unconsciously her rump wiggles a little. My ear picks up the operative word: *wait.*

Ruth Parsons is waiting. In fact, she acts as if she's waiting so hard it's killing her. For what? For someone to get us out of here, what else? ...But why was she so horrified when I got up to try to leave? Why all this tension?

My paranoia stirs. I grab it by the collar and start idly checking back. Up to when whoever it was showed up last night, Mrs. Parson was, I guess, normal. Calm and sensible, anyway. Now's she's humming like a high wire. And she seems to want to stay here and wait. Just as an intellectual pastime, why?

Could she have intended to come here? No way. Where she planned to be was Chetumal, which is on the border. Come to think, Chetumal is an odd way round to Tikál. Let's say the scenario was that she's meeting somebody in Chetumal. Somebody who's part of an organisation. So now her contact in Chetumal knows she's overdue. And when those types appeared last night, something suggests to her that they're part of the same organisation. And she hopes they'll put one and one together and come back for her?

"May I have the knife, Don? I'll clean the fish."

Rather slowly I pass the knife, kicking my subconscious. Such a decent ordinary little woman, a good girl scout. My trouble is that

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I've bumped into too many professional agilities under the careful stereotypes. *I'm not very memorable...*

What's in Foreign Procurement Archives? Wittig handles classified contracts. Lots of money stuff; foreign currency negotiations, commodity price schedules, some industrial technology. Or — just as a hypothesis — it could be as simple as a wad of bills back in that modest beige Ventura, to be exchanged for a packet from say, Costa Rica. If she were a courier, they'd want to get at the plane. And then what about me and maybe Esteban? Even hypothetically, not good.

I watch her hacking at the fish, forehead knotted with effort, teeth in her lip. Mrs. Ruth Parsons of Bethesda, this thrumming, private woman. How crazy can I get? *They'll see our smoke...*

"Here's your knife, Don. I washed it. Does the leg hurt very badly?"

I blink away the fantasies and see a scared little woman in a mangrove swamp.

"Sit down, rest. You've been going all out."

She sits obediently, like a kid in a dentist chair.

"You're stewing about Althea. And she's probably worried about you. We'll get back tomorrow under our own stream, Ruth."

"Honestly I'm not worried at all, Don." The smile fades; she nibbles her lip, frowning out at the bay.

"Ruth, you know you surprised me when you offered to come along. Not that I don't appreciate it. But I rather thought you'd be concerned about leaving Althea. Alone with our good pilot, I mean. Or was it only me?"

This gets her attention at last.

"I believe Captain Estéban is a very fine type of man."

The words surprise me a little. Isn't the correct line more like "I trust Althea," or even, indignantly, "Althea is a good girl"?

"He's a man. Althea seemed to think he was interesting."

She goes on staring at the bay. And then I notice her tongue flick out and lick that prehensile upper lip. There's a flush that isn't sunburn around her ears and throat too, and one hand is gently rubbing her thigh. What's she seeing, out there in the flats?

Captain Estéban's mahogany arms clasping Miss Althea Parsons' pearly body. Captain Estéban's archaic nostrils snuffling in Miss Parsons' tender neck. Captain Estéban's copper buttocks pumping into Althea's creamy upturned bottom...The hammock, very bouncy. Mayas know all about it.

Well, well. So Mother Hen has her little quirks.

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I feel fairly silly and more than a little irritated. *Now* I find out...But even vicarious lust has much to recommend it, here in the mud and rain. I settle back, recalling that Miss Althea the computer programmer had waved good-bye very composedly. Was she sending her mother to flounder across the bay with me so she can get programmed in Maya? The memory of Honduran mahogany logs drifting in and out of the opalescent sand comes to me. Just as I am about to suggest that Mrs. Parsons might care to share my rain shelter, she remarks serenely, "The Mayas seem to be a very fine type of people. I believe you said so to Althea."

The implications fall on me with the rain. *Type.* As in breeding, bloodline, sire. Am I supposed to have certified Esteban not only as a stud but as a genetic donor?

"Ruth, are you telling me you're prepared to accept a half-Indian grandchild?"

"Why, Don, that's up to Althea, you know."

Looking at the mother, I guess it is. Oh, for mahogany gonads.

Ruth has gone back to listening to the wind, but I'm not about to let her off that easy. Not after all that *noli me tangere* jazz.

"What will Althea's father think?"

Her face snaps around at me, genuinely startled.

"Althea's father?" Complicated semismile. "He won't mind."

"He'll accept it too, eh?" I see her shake her head as if a fly were bothering her, and add with a cripple's malice: "Your husband must be a very fine type of a man."

Ruth looks at me, pushing her wet hair back abruptly. I have the impression that mousy Mrs. Parsons is roaring out of control, but her voice is quiet.

"There isn't any Mr. Parsons, Don. There never was. Althea's father was a Danish medical student...I believe he has gained considerable prominence."

"Oh." Something warns me not to say I'm sorry. "You mean he doesn't know about Althea?"

"No." She smiles, her eyes bright and cuckoo.

"Seems like rather a rough deal for her."

"I grew up quite happily under the same circumstances."

Bang, I'm dead. Well, well, well. A mad image blooms in my mind: generations of solitary. Parsons women selecting sires, making impregnation trips. Well, I hear the world is moving their way.

"I better look at the fish line."

She leaves. The glow fades. *No.* Just no, no contact. Good-bye, Captain Estéban. My leg is very uncomfortable. The hell with Mrs. Parsons' long-distance orgasm.

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We don't talk much after that, which seems to suit Ruth. The odd day drags by. Squall after squall blows over us. Ruth singes up some more fillets, but the rain drowns her smudge; it seems to pour hardest just as the sun's about to show.

Finally she comes to sit under my sagging serape, but there's no warmth there. I doze, aware of her getting up now and then to look around. My subconscious notes that she's still twitchy. I tell my subconscious to knock it off.

Presently I wake up to find her penciling on the water-soaked pages of a little notepad.

"What's that, a shopping list for alligators?"

Automatic polite laugh. "Oh, just an address. In case we — I'm being silly, Don."

"Hey." I sit up, wincing. "Ruth, quit fretting. I mean it. We'll all be out of this soon. You'll have a great story to tell."

She doesn't look up. "Yes...I guess we will."

"Come on, we're doing fine. There isn't any real danger here, you know. Unless you're allergic to fish?"

Another good-little-girl laugh, but there's a shiver in it.

"Sometimes I think I'd like to go...really far away."

To keep her talking I say the first thing in my head.

"Tell me, Ruth. I'm curious why you would settle for that kind of lonely life, there in Washington? I mean, a woman like you —"

"Should, get married?" She gives a shaky sigh, pushing the notebook back in her wet pocket.

"Why not? It's the normal source of companionship. Don't tell me you're trying to be some kind of professional man-hater."

"Lesbian, you mean?" Her laugh sounds better. "With my security rating? No, I'm not."

"Well, then. Whatever trauma you went through, these things don't last forever. You can't hate all men."

The smile is back. "Oh, there wasn't any trauma, Don, and I *don't* hate men. That would be as silly as — as hating the weather." She glances wryly at the blowing rain.

"I think you have a grudge. You're even spooky of me."

Smooth as a mouse bite she says, "I'd love to hear about your family, Don?"

Touché. I give her the edited version of how I don't have one any more, and she says she's sorry, how sad. And we chat about what a good life a single person really has, and how she and her friends enjoy plays and concerts and travel, and one of them is head cashier for Ringling Brothers, how about that?

But it's coming out jerkier and

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jerkier like a bad tape, with her eyes going round the horizon in the pauses and her face listening for something that isn't my voice. What's wrong with her? Well, what's wrong with any furtively unconventional middle-aged woman with an empty bed. And a security clearance. An old habit of mind remarks unkindly that Mrs. Parsons represents what is known as the classic penetration target.

"— so much more opportunity now." Her voice trails off.

"Hurrah for women's lib, eh?"

"The lib?" Impatiently she leans forward and tugs the serape straight. "Oh, that's doomed."

The word apocalyptic jars my attention.

"What do you mean, doomed?"

She glances at me as if I weren't hanging straight either and says vaguely, "Oh..."

"Come on, why doomed? Didn't they get that equal rights bill?"

Long hesitation. When she speaks again her voice is different.

"Women have no rights, Don, except what men allow us. Men are more agressive and powerful, and they run the world. When the next real crisis upsets them, our so-called rights will vanish like — like that smoke. We'll be back where we always were: property. And whatever has gone wrong will be blamed on our freedom, like the fall of Rome was. You'll see."

Now all this is delivered in a grey tone of total conviction. The last time I heard that tone, the speaker was explaining why he had to keep his file drawers full of dead pigeons.

"Oh, come on. You and your friends are the backbone of the system; if you quit, the country would come to a screeching halt before lunch."

No answering smile.

"That's fantasy." Her voice is still quiet. "Women don't work that way. We're a — a toothless world." She looks around as if she wanted to stop talking. "What women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine."

"Sounds like a guerrilla operation." I'm not really joking, here in the 'gator den. In fact, I'm wondering if I spent too much thought on mahogany logs.

"Guerrillas have something to hope for." Suddenly she switches on the jolly smile. "Think of opossums, Don. Did you know there are opossums living all over? Even in New York City."

I smile back with my neck prickling. I thought I was the paranoid one.

"Men and women aren't different species, Ruth. Women do everything men do."

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"Do they?" Our eyes meet, but she seems to be seeing ghosts between us in the rain. She mutters something that could be "My Lai" and looks away. "All the endless wars..." Her voice is a whisper. "All the huge authoritarian organizations for doing unreal things. Men live to struggle against each other; we're just part of the battlefields. It'll never change unless you change the whole world. I dream sometimes of — of going away —" She checks and abruptly changes voice. "Forgive me, Don, it's so stupid saying all this."

"Men hate wars too, Ruth," I say as gently as I can.

"I know." She shrugs and climbs to her feet. "But that's your problem, isn't it?"

End of communication. Mrs. Ruth Parsons isn't even living in the same world with me.

I watch her move around restlessly, head turning toward the ruins. Alienation like that can add up to dead pigeons, which would be GSA's problem. It could also lead to believing some joker who's promising to change the world. Which could just probably be my problem if one of them was over in that camp last night, where she keeps looking. *Guerrillas have something to hope for...?*

Nonsense. I try another position and see that the sky seems to be clearing as the sun sets. The wind is quieting down at last too. Insane to think this little woman is acting out some fantasy in this swamp. But that equipment last night was no fantasy; if those lads have some connection with her, I'll be in the way. You couldn't find a handier spot to dispose of a body...Maybe some Guevarista is a fine type of man?

Absurd. Sure...The only thing more absurd would be to come through the wars and get myself terminated by a mad librarian's boyfriend on a fishing trip.

A fish flops in the stream below us. Ruth spins around so fast she hits the serape. "I better start the fire," she says, her eyes still on the plain and her head cocked, listening.

All right, let's test.

"Expecting company?"

It rocks her. She freezes, and her eyes come swiveling around at me like a film take captioned Fright. I can see her decide to smile.

"Oh, one never can tell!" She laughs weirdly, the eyes not changed. "I'll get the — the kindling." She fairly scuttles into the brush.

Nobody, paranoid or not, could call *that* a normal reaction.

Ruth Parsons is either psycho or she's expecting something to happen — and it has nothing to do with me; I scared her pissless.

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Well, she could be nuts. And I could be wrong, but there are some mistakes you only make once. Reluctantly I unzip my body belt, telling myself that if I think what I think, my only course is to take something for my leg and get as far as possible from Mrs. Ruth Parsons before whoever she's waiting for arrives.

In my belt also is a .32 caliber asset Ruth doesn't know about — and it's going to stay there. My longevity program leaves the shoot-outs to TV and stresses being somewhere else when the roof falls in. I can spend a perfectly safe and also perfectly horrible night out in one of those mangrove flats...am I insane?

At this moment Ruth stands up and stares blatantly inland with her hand shading her eyes. Then she tucks something into her pocket, buttoms up and tightens her belt.

That does it.

I dry-swallow two 100 mg tabs, which should get me ambulatory and still leave me wits to hide. Give it a few minutes. I make sure my compass and some hooks are in my own pocket and sit waiting while Ruth fusses with her smudge fire, sneaking looks away when she thinks I'm not watching.

The flat world around us is turning into an unearthly amber and violet light show as the first numbness seeps into my leg. Ruth has crawled under the bromels for more dry stuff; I can see her foot. Okay. I reach for my staff.

Suddenly the foot jerks, and Ruth yells — or rather, her throat makes that *Uh-uh-uhhh* that means pure horror. The foot disappears in a rattle of bromel stalks.

I lunge upright on the crutch and look over the bank at a frozen scene.

Ruth is crouching sideways on the ledge, clutching her stomach. They are about a yard below, floating on the river in a skiff. While I was making up my stupid mind, her friends have glided right under my ass. There are three of them.

They are tall and white. I try to see them as men in some kind of white jumpsuits. The one nearest the bank is stretching out a long white arm toward Ruth. She jerks and scuttles further away.

The arm stretches after her. It stretches and stretches. It stretches two yards and stays hanging in air. Small black things are wiggling from its tip.

I look where their faces should be and see black hollow dishes with vertical stripes. The stripes move slowly...

There is no more possibility of their being human — or anything else I've ever seen. What has Ruth conjured up?

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The scene is totally silent. I blink, blink — this cannot be real. The two in the far end of the skiff are writhing those arms around an apparatus on a tripod. A weapon? Suddenly I hear the same blurry voice I heard in the night.

"Guh-give," it groans. "G-give..."

Dear god, it's real, whatever it is. I'm terrified. My mind is trying not to form a word.

And Ruth — Jesus, of course — Ruth is terrified too; she's edging along the bank away from them, gaping at the monsters in the skiff, who are obviously nobody's friends. She's hugging something to her body. Why doesn't she get over the bank and circle back behind me?

"G-g-give." That wheeze is coming from the tripod. "Pee-eeze give." The skiff is moving upstream below Ruth, following her. The arm undulates out at her again, its black digits looping. Ruth scrambles to the top of the bank.

"Ruth!" My voice cracks. "Ruth, get over here behind me!"

She doesn't look at me, only keeps sidling farther away. My terror detonates into anger.

"Come back here!" With my free hand I'm working the .32 out of my belt. The sun has gone down.

She doesn't turn but straightens up warily, still hugging the thing. I see her mouth working. Is she actually trying to *talk* to them?

"Please..." She swallows. "Please speak to me. I need your help."

"RUTH!!"

At this moment the nearest white monster whips into a great S-curve and sails right onto the bank at her, eight feet of snowy rippling horror.

And I shoot Ruth.

I don't know that for a minute — I've yanked the gun up so fast that my staff slips and dumps me as I fire. I stagger up, hearing Ruth scream "No! No! No!"

The creature is back down by his boat, and Ruth is still farther away, clutching herself. Blood is running down her elbow.

"Stop it, Don! They aren't attacking you!"

"For god's sake! Don't be a fool, I can't help you if you won't get away from them!"

No reply. Nobody moves. No sound except the drone of a jet passing far above. In the darkening stream below me the three white figures shift uneasily; I get the impression of radar dishes focusing. The word spells itself in my head: *Aliens.*

Extraterrestrials.

What do I do, call the President? Capture them single-handed with my peashooter?...I'm alone in the arse end of nowhere with one leg and my brain cuddled in meperidine hydrochloride.

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"Prrr-eese," their machine blurs again. "Wa-wat hep..."

"Our plane fell down," Ruth says in a very distinct, eerie voice. She points up at the jet, out towards the bay. "My — my child is there. Please take us *there* in your boat."

Dear god. While she's gesturing, I get a look at the thing she's hugging in her wounded arm. It's metallic, like a big glimmering distributor head. What —?

Wait a minute. This morning: when she was gone so long, she could have found that thing. Something they left behind. Or dropped. And she hid it, not telling me. That's why she kept going under that bromel clump — she was peeking at it. Waiting. And the owners came back and caught her. They want it. She's trying to bargain, by god.

"— Water," Ruth is pointing again. "Take us. Me. And him."

The black faces turn toward me, blind and horrible. Later on I may be grateful for that "us." Not now.

"Throw your gun away, Don. They'll take us back." Her voice is weak.

"Like hell I will. You — who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Oh god, does it matter? He's frightened," she cries to them. "Can you understand?"

She's as alien as they, there in the twilight. The beings in the skiff are twittering among themselves. Their box starts to moan.

"Ss-stu-dens," I make out. "S-stu-ding..not — huh-arm-ing... w-we...buh..." It fades into garble and then says "G-give...we... g-go..."

Peace-loving cultural-exchange students — on the interstellar level now. Oh, no.

"Bring that thing here, Ruth — right now!"

But she's starting down the bank toward them saying. "Take me."

"Wait! You need a tourniquet on that arm."

"I know. Please put the gun down, Don."

She's actually at the skiff, right by them. They aren't moving.

"Jesus Christ." Slowly, reluctantly I drop the .32. When I start down the slide, I find I'm floating; adrenaline and Demerol are a bad mix.

The skiff comes gliding toward me, Ruth in the bow clutching the thing and her arm. The aliens stay in the stern behind their tripod, away from me. I note the skiff is camouflaged tan and green. The world around us is deep shadowy blue.

"Don, bring the water bag!"

As I'm dragging down the plastic bag, it occurs to me that

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Ruth really is cracking up, the water isn't needed now. But my own brain seems to have gone into overload. All I can focus on is a long white rubbery arm with black worms clutching the far end of the orange tube, helping me fill it. This isn't happening.

"Can you get in, Don?" As I hoist my numb legs up, two long white pipes reach for me. *No you don't.* I kick and tumble in beside Ruth. She moves away.

A creaky hum starts up, it's coming from a wedge in the center of the skiff. And we're in motion, sliding toward dark mangrove files.

I stare mindlessly at the wedge. Alien technological secrets? I can't see any, the power source is under that triangular cover, about two feet long. The gadgets on the tripod are equally cryptic, except that one has a big lens. Their light?

As we hit the open bay, the hum rises and we start planing faster and faster still. Thirty knots? Hard to judge in the dark. Their hull seems to be a modified trihedral much like ours, with a remarkable absence of slap. Say twenty-two feet. Schemes of capturing it swirl in my mind: I'll need Estéban.

Suddenly a huge flood of white light fans out over us from the tripod, blotting out the aliens in the stern. I see Ruth pulling at a belt around her arm, which is still hugging the gizmo.

"I'll tie that for you."

"It's all right."

The alien device is twinkling or phosphorescing slightly. I lean over to look, whispering, "Give that to me, I'll pass it to Estéban."

"No!" She scoots away, almost over the side. "It's theirs, they need it!"

"What? Are you crazy?" I'm so taken aback by this idiocy I literally stammer. "We have to, we —"

"They haven't hurt us. I'm sure they could." Her eyes are watching me with feral intensity; in the light her face has a lunatic look. Numb as I am, I realize that the wretched woman is poised to throw herself over the side if I move. With the gizmo.

"I think they're gentle," she mutters.

"For Christ's sake, Ruth, they're *aliens!*"

"I'm used to it," she says absently. "There's the island! Stop! Stop here!"

The skiff slows, turning. A mound of foliage is tiny in the light. Metal glints — the plane.

"Althea! Althea! Are you all right?"

Yells, movement on the plane. The water is high, we're floating over the bar. The aliens are keeping us in the lead with the light hiding them. I see one pale figure splashing toward us and a dark one

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behind, coming more slowly. Estéban must be puzzled by that light.

"Mr. Fenton is hurt, Althea. These people brought us back with the water. Are you all right?"

"A-okay." Althea flounders up, peering excitedly. "You all right? Whew, that light!" Automatically I start handing her the idiotic water bag.

"Leave that for the captain," Ruth says sharply. "Althea, can you climb in the boat? Quickly, it's important."

"Coming!"

"No, no!" I protest, but the skiff tilts as Althea swarms in. The aliens twitter, and their voice box starts groaning. "Gu-give...now... give..."

"*Que llega?*" Estéban's face appears beside me, squinting fiercely into the light.

"Grab it, get it from her — that thing she has —" but Ruth's voice rides over mine. "Captain, lift Mr. Fenton out of the boat. He's hurt his leg. Hurry, please."

"Goddamn it, wait!" I shout, but an arm has grabbed my middle. When a Maya boosts you, you go. I hear Althea saying, "Mother, your arm!" and fall onto Estéban. We stagger around in water up to my waist; I can't feel my feet at all.

When I get steady, the boat is yards away, the two women, head-to-head, murmuring.

"Get them!" I tug loose from Estéban and flounder forward. Ruth stands up in the boat facing the invisible aliens.

"Take us with you. Please. We want to go with you, away from here."

"Ruth! Estéban, get that boat!" I lunge and lose my feet again. The aliens are chirruping madly behind their light.

"Please take us. We don't mind what your planet is like; we'll learn — we'll do anything! We won't cause any trouble. Please. Oh *please.*" The skiff is drifting farther away.

"Ruth! Althea! You're crazy, wait —" But I can only shuffle nightmarelike in the ooze, hearing that damn voice box wheeze, "N-not come...more...not come..." Althea's face turns to it, open-mouthed grin.

"Yes, we understand," Ruth cries. "We don't want to come back. Please let us go with you!"

I shout and Estéban splashes past me shouting too, something about radio.

"Yes-s-s" groans the voice.

Ruth sits down suddenly, clutching Althea. At that moment Estéban grabs the edge of the skiff beside her.

"Hold them, Estéban! Don't let her go."

He gives me one slit-eyed glance over his shoulder, and I recognize

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his total uninvolvement. He's had a good look at that camouflage paint and the absence of fishing gear. I make a desperate rush and slip again. When I come up Ruth is saying, "We're going with these people, Captain. Please take your money out of my purse, it's in the plane. And give this to Mr. Fenton."

She passes him something small; the notebook. He takes it slowly.

"Estéban! Don't!"

He has released the skiff.

"Thank you so much," Ruth says as they float apart. Her voice is shaky; she raises it. "There won't be any trouble, Don. Please send this cable. It's to a friend of mine, she'll take care of everything." Then she adds the craziest touch of the entire night. "She's a grand person; she's director of nursing training at N.I.H."

As the skiff drifts, I hear Althea add something that sounds like "Right on."

Sweet Jesus...Next minute the humming has started; the light is receding fast. The last I see of Mrs. Ruth Parsons and Miss Althea Parsons is two small shadows against that light, like two opossums. The light snaps off, the hum deepens — and they're going, going, gone away.

In the dark water beside me Estéban is instructing everybody in general to *chingarse* themselves.

"Friends, or something," I tell him lamely. "She seemed to want to go with them."

He is pointedly silent, hauling me back to the plane. He knows what could be around here better than I do, and Mayas have their own longevity program. His condition seems improved. As we get in I notice the hammock has been repositioned.

In the night — of which I remember little — the wind changes. And at seven thirty next morning a Cessna buzzes the sandbar under cloudless skies.

By noon we're back in Cozumel. Captain Estéban accepts his fees and departs laconically for his insurance wars. I leave the Parsons' bags with the Caribe agent, who couldn't care less. The cable goes to a Mrs. Priscilla Hayes Smith also of Bethesda. I take myself to a medico and by three PM I'm sitting on the Cabañas terrace with a fat leg and a double margharita, trying to believe the whole thing.

The cable said, *Althea and I taking extraordinary opportunity for travel. Gone several years. Please take charge our affairs. Love, Ruth.*

She'd written it that afternoon, you understand.

I order another double, wishing to hell I'd gotten a good look at that gizmo. Did it have a label, Made by

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Betelgeusians? No matter how weird it was, *how* could a person be crazy enough to imagine —?

Not only that but to hope, to plan? *If I could only go away...* That's what she was doing, all day. Waiting, hoping, figuring how to get Althea. To go sight unseen to an alien world...

With the third margharita I try a joke about alienated women, but my heart's not in it. And I'm certain there won't be any bother, any trouble at all. Two human women, one of them possibly pregnant, have departed for, I guess, the stars; and the fabric of society will never show a ripple. I brood; do all Mrs. Parsons' friends hold themselves in readiness for any eventuality, including leaving Earth? And will Mrs. Parsons somehow one day contrive to send for Mrs. Priscilla Hayes Smith, that grand person?

I can only send for another cold one, musing on Althea. What suns will Captain Estéban's sloe-eyed offspring, if any, look upon? "Get in, Althea, we're taking off for Orion." "A-okay, Mother." Is that some system of upbringing? *We survive by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine...I'm used to aliens...*She'd meant every word.Insane. How could a woman choose to live among unknown monsters, to say good-bye to her home, her world?

As the margharitas take hold, the whole mad scenario melts down to the image of those two small shapes sitting side by side in the receding alien glare.

Two of our opossums are missing.

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Herbert Gold's first story here since "The Mirror and Mrs. Sneeves," (Dec. 1961) is an amusing new twist on a favorite theme, in which a Harvard MBA deals with the devil on small ticket items only, e. g. free utilities, stamps, underwear, etc. These things can add up.

Time-Sharing Man

by HERBERT GOLD

Back in the old days of pure capitalism, a man could sell his soul and get good money for it right away. Now you might have to go through title search, insurance, not to speak of long lines of price cutters and discount operations; the devil prefers to lease, like other control-conscious mini-conglomerates. I hate that word "synergy," two and two adding up to five, but that's how the fast thinkers work. Stylish.

Mustapha Klein, what a name, didn't have to tell me there's over population, as everywhere, among would-be Fausts. Or overcrowding might be the word. Anyway, my interest was in results, not historical mooning or word picking. So when this piercing-eyed visitor, a sort of a four-thousand-year-old, but well-preserved, Sunset Strip hippie offered me a little deal, no questions asked, I felt inclined to go ahead. What could I lose but his respect? And he wasn't anybody important in the circles where I travel; nobody is who fluffs himself off into a bit of smoke, fog, smog, or dust before your eyes. But his eyes should have made me think twice: clear, cold, and accurate, all in tones of black and gray, like the best Xerox copy of eyes you ever saw.

Before I tell you about this djin's deal, maybe I should tell you

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about me. I'm an MBA from Harvard — Master of Biz Ad — but I'm not some liberal arts ivy creep. Undergraduate at Illinois. I like results. I have good ideas in franchising, although finito the time of licenses going like hotcakes, when all you needed was some loudmouth athlete's name for the sign and menu. I'll do boats, Multilithing, bicycles, turf-surf-n-barf — that's steak, frozen seafood, and fried chicken, together again in one plate in an atmosphere of highway charm (royal red tablecloths, storm lamps) — I'm ready with the idea and the hard work. I think big. I'll carry it public. I just hate the details. That's what you need to know about me, unless you want to hear I've let my sideburns grow so I can also make it with the youth market. After all, this is LA, isn't it?

He appeared out of the box in which I keep used-up ball-point pens. A little economy from my troubled boyhood in Winnetka. I hate to throw them away, in case they happen to regenerate color. First he was a mist, then solid smoke; at last he stood, smiling and bowing, by my desk in the Westwood Apts. as I did the month's accounts. He was wearing wash-and-wear summer gossamer robes embroidered with peace symbols, American flags, Love It Or Leave It, and Only Outlaws Will Carry Guns. I suppose some witch was doing his embroidering. His cheeks were pink, his eyes had that cool inkiness I've already mentioned, and his mouth was smiling but not wasteful. It was a smile of intention. "Mustapha Klein, at your service," he said. "You called?"

"I was just cursing and wishing," I said.

"You hit upon the formula," he said.

"I do it every month when I pay the bills," I said.

"This time you did it right," he said. "Okay, you made a lucky hit. The devil take it. The devil take it right now. And I just happened to be in a period of recession. So I says to myself when your message came through: *why not?* I'll explain, Alden."

He knew my name. He used it frequently in conversation like that — blah blah blah, comma *Alden.* It's a common trick of stimulating friendly feeling, goes all the way back to Dale Carnegie, but that wasn't what sold me. What sold me was: I was presold. The market, Alden Keep-My-Name-Out, was ready for the product.

Nevertheless, the deal was a peculiar one. All I got was a small-ticket release from the minor pangs of life: no bills under a hundred dollars. That is, electricity, gas, minor restaurant, taxi,

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telephone, laundry, grocery accounts relieved — most of the annoying little expenses which take a lot of time and, finally, add up to a decent sum of money. At the end of the month, nothing much. I could get in and out of taxis and someone invisible would manage. No change jangling in my pocket. At the end of the month my bank statement would have nothing but large amounts on it. A minute's checking does it.

In return, a 99-year, no-pang lease on my soul. The guarantee: no suffering. There was one additional option: all the money I wanted, riches beyond compare, only with this deal my soul suffered the torments of the damned, boiling oil, wrung through wringers, squeezed through juicers, et cetera, and I decided against it. No thanks. But the pangless arrangement suited me fine. I hated the little routines which sap so much of a fellow's energy, time, and ready cash.

What a bracing air of freedom! Just stand up and breathe! Look out over the twinkling lights of the Los Angeles basin! Life was good.

"Thanks a bunch, Mustapha," I said.

"You can call me Mister Klein," he said, "*Alden.*" It wasn't so much a reproach as a matter of dignity. He wasn't into that LA free-and-easy youth thing. He wanted to make it clear who was the chief: M.K. All right, I'll play by his rules.

He must have seen I was willing to learn. The American system is okay with me. You give respect, you get opportunities, and later on maybe you can call the Devil by his first name.

"I want you to know I regret nothing, sir," I said. "I feel good about this whole thing, Mister Klein."

He winked. Not consistent with his whole dignity trip. Well, when you're the chief, it's time to learn to relax. In the first place, promotes good feeling; plus, in the second place, many doctors say it lowers the cholesterol.

As a bonus for prompt reply, maybe just to throw me a little curve offbase after the reproach about overfamiliarity, Mustapha Klein gave me a terrific extra benefit: small-ticket weightlessness. That is, suitcases, keys, wallets, clothes — no weight at all. I was warm, but naked. I was pretty, but light on my feet. I felt like Cassius Clay (I'll never learn to call him Mr. Ali, I'm-an American fight fan). It was neat. It was much better than a total business manager, plus an English royal flunky. No petty mind dogging your feet. Freedom from minor care. Man, if you could only franchise this.

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Mustapha Klein got smaller and smaller, he was waving, he was slipping into the little box with the ball-point pens, he was mist, he was smoke, he was gone.

Well, that's that. I didn't need a friend, I just needed service. On the first of the month, which is Bank AmeriCard Day all over the nation, unless you happen to celebrate Diners Club Shroveday or American Express Eve — or you're the ecumenical sort who carries a flipout wallet with all your cards, including silly Gulf Oil, enshrined in transparent plastic — on that day I sat home, just answering a few personal letters. I even wrote to one of my profs at Harvard; might be he could get useful someday. Throughout America, young businessmen and professionals were sweating over slimy receipts and carbons and checkbook stubs. I was writing a friendly letter. I was reading *Playboy*. All those little return envelops with never a stamp on them any more — doctor, periodontist, window-washing service, Pacific Bell, all those annoyances — were whisked away like dust into a vacuum cleaner. How could I trouble over use of my soul when it caused me no pain? This was a fine offer, thought I, and if he comes to confirm it, I'll sign once again.

Actually, it was an oral agreement. No signing in blood, gore, or mucous; none of that hoary, old-fashioned, low-budget stuff. We were gentlemen, Mr. Klein and Alden.

He didn't appear for renewal. If he checked to see if I'd already sold my soul to another, he must have found it free and clear. The deal was binding for the rest of my life on earth, plus a few extra years, even allowing for the astounding increases in gerontological research these days. Personally, I'm not making any plans to live to more than a hundred.

This special offer, in my neighborhood only, also provided for certain benefits I had not expected. For example, I didn't renew my driver's license; a fresh license just appeared on the due date. Occasionally I received by parcel post, prepaid, little useful gifts, just when I needed them — handkerchiefs, underwear, socks, small shopping matters like that. There was a neat stack of shoelaces in my drawer. An endless roll of postage stamps poured from the little dispenser. I would never in my life need to buy another paper clip, Q-tip, or salt cellar. The sudden crisis which sends a bachelor to the corner nothing-store — out. If I married, it would be for love, not housekeeping.

I hardly felt like a human being. I was so free and easy that all my energy could be focused on, on, on

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— what? On the prime matters of life on earth? on destiny? on the meaning of man's brief span?

Or on getting really rich?

Or on making out with the really terrific ladies who cross a fellow's path in California and the world?

Or, through gratitude, in finding God? The God who made a devil possible, who relieved small annoyances so completely, like a master dentist getting rid of a place in the teeth that catches stringy food?

The whole situation was enough to turn a fellow back to a belief in God and Immortality, just like *Look* magazine said before it died. Imagine never having to carry, really *carry* a suitcase — Cary Grant in those old films, where the suitcases are obviously empty, so why should he sweat or grunt? Imagine no keys wearing holes in the pockets, and the car just starts when you touch the lock; no handkerchiefs balled up and lumpy; no piles of checkstubs at the end of the year. I'm not petty, talking about the money saved. It wasn't the money. I was doing all right before he showed up. I'm talking about the conveniences, the ease, the carefree float through cruddy experience.

Of course, the truth be told, those things all add up. I had more ready cash in my checking. I was just a little bit looser for the big-ticket items — sailing, weekend trips to Baja, a definite upgrading in the sports car. It wouldn't be honest to deny it. I'm not preaching the virtues of thrift, Abe Lincoln, Horatio Alger, none of that Middle-America mush, but the fact is, even in my bracket, the total of the Kleenex, taxis, phone bills, utilities, all that debris that both oils and pollutes your passage through life — finally it adds up to One Big Ticket. It isn't the money, you understand. I don't mean to get eloquent or poetic. That's not my line. But I was definitely richer in the total capital department, too.

Well, the title of this confession and revelation is not, as you may have noticed, speed-reading carefully, "How I Got Rid of Small Debts and Found God." Far from it. A limited disclosure. If you got me wrong, go back for a refresher to Evelyn Wood. All I've mentioned is ignoring bills and keys, weightless suitcases, clean clothes and fresh notions, plus a headstart in gathering the love of beautiful women. It all went nicely together.

As far as the ladies are concerned, I stuck with sweet chickies. I didn't need a helper or a helpmate. I might, check, fall head over heels for some horsy product with a fantastic family business; that's always in the realm of possibility; but I try to keep my sex

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life pure. Pure fun. Pure games. Pure entertainment for a head heavy with care. We MBA's bear the burden of the fictitious and perhaps so-called American system. Uneasy wears the head that crowns a lie, haha. I did a lot of humanities as an undergrad because these days, at the top layers of management, it's not golf any more which gets you the fine contacts, it's an outstanding ability to work into culture, art, spectator sports, tennis, things like that. I could Shakespeare up a few jokes in both culture and art, plus a little bit of serious theater (think of Lincoln Center, the Forum, Laurence Olivier revivals, that type of trip). Also I have this yen for the Radcliffe brand of straight-haired beast, you know, both field sports and meditation. They smile at my style, pure Great Lakes, but they also know I've read the same Alan Watts. And I may look simple and once-born, as Amanda Vale told me — "Good Bones" Vale, I called her — but she could tell by my nightmares, my persistent muttering in my sleep, that I was really deep, metempsychic, and twice-born, with guilty secrets I knew not of. I was probably dreaming about Mr. Klein. My djin and tonic, haha.

I had troubled sleep, but all I could use. I had active nights, and many. I was suave. When I got tired of Amanda and she cried at the Black Rabbit as I explained good-by, and I said, "Enough of life in these tears of Vale," and she said, "You're an asshole, Alden," I only smiled and said, "We both know the waiter. He's from the Good Earth Commune. You won't want to come in here again, Amanda, if you make a scene."

Being a really terrific philosophy major only two years away from Cambridge, she understood exactly. She stopped crying and finished her flan and we had a brandy right then and there. Good-by, Amanda, for I am weightless, buzzing, and must move on.

What other total truth can I cop out? The fabric of my dreaming was thin. However, my dreams did come true. When other people's hair smelled of smoke, mine smelled of piny forests. Or so Debbie, who was Amanda's former roommate, told me. I used the right shampoo, it seemed, and always found a fresh dab placed in the shower, just a bit in a paper cup, the exact right amount, whenever it was piny forest time again.

Other people's dreams might be finer, but they forget them when they awaken. And they tend not to come true. Who else follows a delicious Amanda with a supercute Debbie?

How can I explain?

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Space.

Can you believe what I went through?

Think. Dimness.

Oh, I'll just tell what happened to me in the passing months. I'm ashamed. It's the truth. I had made a mistake, that's all, the classical afterthought of those who sell their souls, even though this arrangement was different all up and down the line — *regret.*

Why the devil regret? Who could have predicted it?

I'll just tell.

I don't want to.

Oh, was I bored.

That doesn't feel too much better, but now I can explain. I don't mean that man was created and put on earth for small annoyances. I'm not convinced we need dandruff, occasional conjunctivitis, rose fever, and minor bills to be fully human. But too much of a chunk of routine was removed. My weekends were emptified, not empty. My evenings were hard and heavy with major thought or activities, none of the make-do annoyances which help pass the minor agony of a lifetime on earth. Too much was given and decided. As far as inner resources are concerned, I'd put myself in the top six or eight percentile at Harvard Business, but still —

Help!

Mustapha Klein, come back!

I stood in front of the Morris Plan — Roll Your Debts into One Big Debt — Office. I lifted my hands to the place where it said Friendly. To the empty air I said, "Sir, I need you."

"Hi, there," said Mr. Klein. "How's it going?"

I explained.

"Hm," he said. "Exercise, maybe. All that nervous energy — have you tried pushups? Join a gym? We don't realize how much in the way of calories we burn in those little routines. You're a little fattish, fatty, Alden, if you'll forgive my mentioning it. Putting on a little weight is what I'm trying to say. I just thought I might mention it, but perhaps I won't."

"Believe you did," I said with some sulkiness. Well, who likes to hear about puffy jowls?

"There's a nice health club down on Wilshire. Wouldn't cost you anything," said Mr. Klein.

"Are you enjoying my soul?"

"Bitter, bitter," he said. "Shame."

"I don't feel used," I said.

"Does the computer feel used?" he asked. "On a time-sharing deal, busy twenty-four hours a day, you think the computer gets tired?"

"It doesn't know it's tired," I said.

"If it doesn't know from tired, you think it's tired?" he asked. "Irritated? grubby? aggravated,

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even when it works Sundays, nights, and holidays?" He shook his head with technical know-how. "Not on your butt," he said. "But to answer your question: I'm satisfied with the deal. Pleasure, enjoyment — don't ask."

I hated the idea of being used up without knowing about it. I disliked to be used up while having nothing to do. It was distressing to have all my itchy tasks removed and yet to know I was serving someone — something? — constantly. I might be a Mark III when a new generation was coming in. I liked Mustapha Klein a lot less than I thought I would when he did me this favor.

"I suffer from Identity Crisis," I said to him or it.

"Am I a doctor?" he asked. "Do I look like I'm a degree in psychology?"

"Anomie," I said.

"You talk like a Radcliffe girl, Alden."

"I feel lonely."

"So find yourself a chickie. Take iron pills, maybe vitamin E."

"I've got all three of those things in stock, iron, E, and girls," I said. "I thought it would work out."

He shrugged out there in the blazing sun while two cops in a car idled at the curb, watching — they were young cops — maybe their first pedestrians in Beverly Hills. Was that a look of sympathy which crossed Mr. Klein's head? Did I detect a brother's compassion? No: the desert mirage makes an oasis of a sandpit. I saw boredom crossing his face, and it made my heart leap. He had given me a new holiday, the first of the month, Bank Ameri-Card Day, and that was all the agreement claimed. He didn't have to make me happy.

"If I kill myself," I said, "then what?"

"That's major medical," he said briskly. "Not covered by our deal. Of course, your soul is unkillable, my friend." He sighed. It was as if he were an off-duty cop faced by a messy bar fight. "Okay, what's the trouble here? Guilt? Fear? What?"

"I'm empty and bored," I said. "I miss that something to do. The main thing is: Nothing is changed, and when you get your wishes and nothing is changed, sir, hope is removed."

"Before meeting me you had hope," he said softly. "That's a responsibility, isn't it? All right! Electric, gas, utility, and phone! You pay those bills now."

"Better," I said.

"Suitcases are heavy! Laundry needs to be bundled! Buy your own stamps and paper clips! No more free Kleenex!"

There was suddenly a damp chemical breeze in the air,

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something like the smell of a Xeroxing room, minus the hint of stale coffee and surly temporary help. The smell engulfed me, and then subsided.

"Much better," I said.

"Now you feel okay?"

"It's a start, Mustapha. Thanks a lot, Mustapha."

"But of course I still have the lease on your soul. There's no buyback."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of abrogating —"

"*Trying* to, Alden."

"Trying to abrogate our agreement. I made a deal and I'm sticking to it," I said, thinking of my happy rejoining of the common fate of men. I was in business again.

"You're satisfied," he said. I noticed that he was winding himself up, elbows and knees, really graceful, a sort of aikido gymnastic, getting ready to disappear into thin air. He never used a bottle, unlike the djins I'd heard about previously. Of course, I didn't keep up, once I got interested in Gross National Product. "Why are you smiling?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing." I didn't tell him. Effective next Monday, there were only ninety-eight years and three months left on his lease. I wouldn't let him see me gloat. He wouldn't have Alden What's-His-Name to kick around forever.

He left only a pink spangle from his robe winking on the sidewalk. The cops started their car and moved on when Mustapha Klein disappeared into the smog. They saw no reason to make trouble with a disappearing middle-aged white djin when they could be busting corporeal teen-agers down on the Strip. I picked up the spangle as a souvenir. Amanda never littered, either.

Back home at my desk, I was alone with a little heap of mail. I separated the junk from the first-class envelopes with glassine envelopes and bills inside. I made neat piles. I put cream on my hands when I got a paper cut. I had something to do to occupy the long years of a man's term. I felt a little lobotomized from the claims on my soul, a little empty and distant, a little sad, but that's not much of a price to pay. Once in a while, as I did my accounts, I caught a flash of pulsating nothing, emitting sparks and oozing acid, a meat computer without the meat, working away in what looked like a Xeroxing room. There may have been others like me in that room, but the receptor only cut in twice, and then they corrected the circuits to my optical nerves. Only ninety-eight plus three to go. Thank you for this special offer, Mr. Klein, sir.

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THE DARK CORNER

Dover Publications, in its continuing series on past masters of the macabre, has brought out a collection of stories by Wilkie Collins called *Tales of Terror and the Supernatural.* Collins wrote in the middle of the eighteen hundreds, is firstly-known for his *The Moonstone,* secondly for his *The Woman in White,* and thirdly for nothing else, as far as the general public is concerned. This book is an attempt to at least partially correct that situation by putting on view some of his shorter neglected works, and there is stuff in it which no one seriously interested in tales of terror and the supernatural should miss. True enough, there is represented that reprehensible flaw of the writings of that period, namely the ghost which is, after all, not a ghost, and my teeth once again gnashed uncontrollably at yet another encounter with "The Dead Hand," a story which starts out to tell stylishly of a gentleman attempting to share a room at an inn with a corpse which (shudder) *moves,* then goes on to explain that it wasn't really a corpse at all, folks, only this person who was very, very ill — but that shouldn't put you off an anthology containing such undeniable beauties as "the Dream Woman," "A Terribly Strange Bed," and "Mad Monkton."

GAHAN WILSON

Books

Tales of Terror and the Supernatural, Wilke Collins, Dover, $3.00

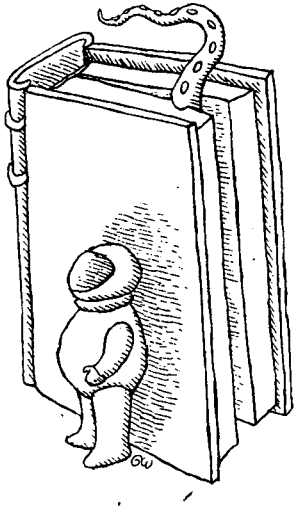
The Peculiar Exploits of Brigadier Ffellowes, Sterling Lanier, Walker, $5.95

The Rim of the Unknown, Frank Belknap Long, Arkham House, $7.50

Disclosures in Scarlet, Carl Jacobi, Arkham House, $5.00

The Caller of the Black, Brian Lumley, Arkham House, $5.00

Demons by Daylight, Ramsey Campbell, Arkham House, $5.00



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Mr. Sam Moskowitz keeps popping up here, one way and another, and here he is as the editor of the revived *Weird Tales*, for heaven's sake! I certainly wish him luck and hope the project succeeds, however I have only seen one copy of the thing on any stand, that in Tuscaloosa, of all places, where I had given an inspirational lecture to an educational establishment the night before, and was killing the morning after by browsing the stands of the local drugstores. It is, by God, authentic enough as its front cover is an unpublished-up-to-now Finlay, and its back is a Rosicrucian ad all the way from San Jose. Inside we have, among other tasty items, the first R. E. Howard story sold *W.T.* or anybody else, a William Hope Hodgson story not printed since it first showed up in 1905, an excellent essay by the editor on Hodgson's early life, and a whole bunch of lovingly-compiled material from all over the place, all very much fitting and proper to be housed in *Weird Tales*. Mr. Moskowitz has started out by producing it as a quarterly, but, obviously, he has hopes. Now if those distributors will just for once co-operate...

Regular readers of this magazine, and I assume we all *are* regular readers, will be familiar with the gentleman refered to in the title of *The Peculiar Exploits of Brigadier Ffellowes* by Sterling Lanier as he is, happily, often present in these pages. Those who are not should know that these stories are in the classic form probably best exploited by Lord Dunsany in his Jorkens tales, namely that of the gentleman-adventurer who reminisces on his hair-raising enterprises while we gather about to listen to him in the security of the exclusive club to which we all snugly belong. There is something wonderfully soothing in this format — the ghastly adventures contrasted with the coziness of the crackling fire, the wing chair, the brandy snifter in one's hand, and, above all, the sure and certain knowledge that the story you are settling back to listen to will be a humdinger. Although the spelling of Ffellowes' name seems to imply the series is approached with tongue in cheek, such is not the case. There is, now and then, some mild joshing between the Brigadier — one does *not* call him General — and a nasty fellow named Williams, but once the story proper is launched into, Mr. Lanier permits no kidding around. He wants to give you a bit of a turn, he does, and he usually succeeds. Although I enjoyed the whole book and am looking forward to more of the same, my favorite exploits to date are

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"Fraternity Brother," "His Coat So Gay," and "The Kings of the Sea." They all have marvelously sinister overtones, and it's obvious Mr. Lanier does serious homework on his themes as his attention to authenticity in detail is excellent. Very good work, and that last favorite mentioned above has a really lovely and casual zinger at the end.

I have no idea how many stories Frank Belknap Long has written, but Arkham House has gathered up a double armful of them in *The Rim of the Unknown*, twenty three of them, in all, crowded into almost three hundred pages of small type. The works come from the forties and fifties, mainly, but there are five from the thirties, and a completely unrepentent shocker from 1927 which calls itself "The Man with a Thousand Legs" and lives 100% up to its title. Mr. Long has a way with fiendish invaders from other planets, dimensions, and what you will, and it is very much his own. A particularly pleasing aspect of his work is his relish in describing their looks, their usually baleful attitude towards ourselves, and, in careful detail, their generally dreadful digestive processes.

Another of the old pros, Carl Jacobi, has a new book out called *Disclosures in Scarlet*, and it ranges in time from a 1938 epic about evil European dictator August Strausvig's really rotten plot to bring the Free World to its knees by means of singing plants from outer space, to a 1970's fantasy about a supergadgeted electronic golf course where the thirteenth is a 1,325-yard hole with a dogleg to the right. In between is a wide variety of Jacobian divertissements, my personal favorites being "The Aguarium," a really nasty piece of work, and a sentimental bit of necrophilia named, rather demurely, all things considered, "The Unpleasantness at Carver House."

Turning from these elder statesmen of the grotesque fantastic, we come to a book written by a talent new to this or any other field, a mere lad, if the implications of the jacket copy have been correctly interpreted by me, yet when one reads Brian Lumley's *The Caller of the Black* what does one find? One finds a collection of stories which reads as if it had been culled from the oldest, most moldering back issues of *Weird Tales*, is what one finds! The earliest date on any of these is 1968, it having appeared in that year's Summer issue of the *Arkham Collector*, but Mr. Lumley has so deeply steeped himself in his source material, that being the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and his

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circle, that his work seems for all the world to have been written by a younger member of that spooky little group away back when in the thirties. These are unabashed pastiches, obviously written by someone enjoying himself enormously, all of them affectionate tributes to Messrs. Lovecraft, Bloch (the horrid endings where the hero rots or gets et being clearly especially dedicated to M. Bloch!), Smith, Derleth and the rest. He uses the props, Gods, italic endings and vocabularies those gentle men held so near and dear, his tales abounding as they do with dreadful books, all too describable *things*, grisly mutilations brought on by fangs, beaks, tentacles and the like, and, of course, cannibalism. In these pages we learn at last what finally happened to Kadath, Etienne-Laurent de Marigny, his clock, and even to Queen Nitocris, evil queen supreme, originally created for *Weird Tales* in 1928 by none other than Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams. It's been a long wait.

A fellow who began things more or less as Mr. Lumley is commencing, Ramsey Campbell, has come out with a new book, *Demons by Daylight*, and a number of very interesting turns. Mr. Campbell's first volume, *The Inhabitant of the Lake*, was written mainly when he was a wee tad, and was a collection of sometimes clever, sometimes touchingly naive, but always quite enjoyable stories based firmly upon the writing of H. P. L. Now he is older, wiser, and a good deal more frightening. I suggest we all keep a sharp eye on him. What he has done is to take Lovecraft's sinister implications out of the era of bootleg whiskey and the depression into the present one of rather more formidable mind-altering drugs and oddly-unsatisfying plenty. He is also abandoning Lovecraft's extremely guarded hints as to what was going on there at the foot of the six thousand steps hard by the pit of shaggoths in favor of clear specifics as to the activities of the ladies and the gentlemen and the monsters. It makes for a chilling set of stories and promises much for what Mr. Campbell will come up with next. The possibilities inherent in Lovecraft's really sensational vision of sexual-physic-spatial-temporal (or sexual/psychic/spatial/temporal!) warps has been, to date, very largely ignored by those who have been intrigued enough to write in the Mythos mood. Colin Wilson has done an excellent job of extending the intellectual aspects of H. P. L.'s mind-bending insights, but, though he has by no means ignored it, his attention to the physical and emotional end of things has been

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relatively peripheral. Also, quite importantly, Mr. Wilson's attention has been directed mainly to extraordinarily superior members of our species, Russellian intellectuals and the like, and folks like you and me in contact with Them has been only barely touched on in his novels. Mr. Campbell, in contrast, does concentrate on folks like you and me, people whose personalities are — no offense, mind — by and large sloppily-built, confusingly-motivated affairs; tottery at best, downright shoddy, now and then. When Mr. Campbell pits his fallible, commonly lonely, quite generally weak, most human characters against enormous forces bent on incomprehensible errands the results are, as you might expect, often frightening, and, as you might not expect, often touching; even heartwarming.

Checklists and Index received

THE N.E.S.F.A. INDEX: Science Fiction Magazines and Original Anthologies 1971-1972. $3.00.

This is a supplement to the *Index to the Science Fiction Magazines* 1951-1965 published by Erwin S. Strauss and the *Index to the Science Fiction Magazines* 1966-1970 published by the N.E.S.F.A. The new 1971-1972 index differs from the previous volumes in that it includes stories published in the original series anthologies as well as magazines. This is a well-prepared and extremely useful series of volumes; highly recommended. Available from: The New England Science Fiction Assoc., Inc., P. O. Box G, M.I.T. Branch P. O., Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

HARLAN ELLISON: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CHECKLIST, Compiled by Leslie Kay Swigart. $3.50.

A chronological listing of Harlan Ellison's publications through April 1973. Includes not only fiction but also scripts, articles, letters, etc. Silverberg, Asimov, Bova and others have contributed appreciations, and there are plenty of photos of Harlan. A must for anyone with the slightest interest in Ellison and his work. Available from: Leslie Kay Swigart, Box 8570, Long Beach, Calif. 90808. —*E.L.F.*

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Richard Lupoff's new story is about one Myron Castleman, trapped in a literally endless Manhattan lunch hour. Mr. Lupoff's new books include BARSOOM: EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS AND THE MARTIAN VISION (Mirage), THE COMIC BOOK BOOK (Arlington), and INTO THE AETHER (Dell) a novel scheduled for publication in January.

12:01 P. M.

by RICHARD A. LUPOFF

There was the echo of that single, loud sound resembling the crashing implosion of air into a shattered vacuum tube or the report of a small-caliber firearm. The clock on the Grand Central Tower said 12:01, as it always did at resumption time, and Castleman knew that the dateline on the newspapers being hawked at the corner of Lexington and 46th would be the same that it always was.

He waited for the familiar grime-crusted, green-and-silver bus to make its turn onto short Vanderbilt Avenue, dodged the usual yellow taxi while crossing Vanderbilt himself, and passed between the two Cadillac limousines waiting at the curb for their passengers to return from whatever errand detained them.

On the west side of Madison he stopped in front of Finchley's, waited for the middle-aged window dresser to set up the full-length mirror at the back of the display, as he did every time, and perfunctorily inspected himself in its shiny surface. Same tweed suit, striped button-down shirt and modishly broad tie, same haircomb with one stubborn lock sticking out above his left ear. He put a hand to his chin and rubbed vigorously, but there was no particular evidence of stubble.

Not that he could have grown much stubble in an hour, but if the effect of the hours was cumulative for him, it should become apparent after a dozen or two resumptions.

Strolling casually toward the West Side, he decided to stop at the

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first convenient restaurant and get himself a snack. The sky was blue and unusually clear for midtown, the air warm and slightly moist with the moisture of a balmy spring day rather than with the sticky humidity that used to come later in the year. A good thing, Castleman thought, that the resumptions had come on such an afternoon rather than in the middle of a midwinter cold snap with the streets full of dirty slush and everyone sneezing and coughing flu bugs at one another.

He stepped into Hamburger Heaven and surveyed the situation vis-a-vis seating. There were no vacancies but only a handful of people waited ahead of him. No point in waiting in a long line or trying to dine in a fancy restaurant where a fancy lunch could take two hours to consume. If he couldn't get served and finish his meal by one o'clock, it was a waste.

Which is not to say that it wasn't one anyhow. At the next resumption he'd be back on the sidewalk gazing up at the Grand Central Tower anyway; he'd have a pleasant appetite anyway; if he took off his tie and flushed it down the toilet in the basement washroom of Hamburger Heaven, he'd find it back knotted around his neck, clean and dry. Or at least he was confident that he would; that might prove an interesting experiment to try sometime, but the result was pretty well a foregone conclusion.

The hostess had come over to the small group of customers waiting for seats and was holding up two fingers in a V sign. Castleman looked beside him and found, to his surprise, that he had reached the head of the line. He turned to the person beside him and asked if she would mind sharing a table.

"It'll save time," he said, stifling an urge to laugh at his own line.

The woman nodded agreement, and the hostess showed them to a tiny wooden table near the back of the restaurant. They contorted themselves onto the fixed wooden seats and received oversized, ketchup-and coffee-stained menus. Castleman decided quickly what he wanted and lowered his menu, letting his eyes take in his impromptu companion.

She was obviously a working girl — or woman, more accurately. Slightly overage and overweight for the blouse and modish-length skirt she affected, with her hair done up in an elaborately curled style that almost suited her oval face. She put her menu down, clearly having made her own choice of food, and looked at Castleman.

"Do you eat here often?" she said.

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Castleman said, "Not very."

"I didn't think so. I come here every day. There are so many regulars, so many transients. As soon as I didn't recognize you, I knew who you were."

"Makes sense," Castleman said. He looked around the room for a wall clock, wishing that he'd had a watch at resumption time, knowing that he could get one easily enough now but that it would be gone at the end of the hour anyway.

There was a clock at the back of Hamburger Heaven. It was nearing half past. Castleman wished that the resumptions came farther apart, really an hour wasn't long enough to do much. But then, he thought philosophically, it could be a lot worse. Hung up at a period of five minutes, he'd never get *anything* done. And if it were *really* short — say, a second or less — it would be a living hell.

You could get a fair amount done in an hour. In fact, in some ways, it was an ideal situation to be in. Anything you do, you can mess up, anything, and get another chance in an hour. On the other hand it wasn't so ideal to do something worthwhile knowing that it would be totally wiped out, but then the positive and negative aspects of reality often balanced that way.

He looked at the plump woman sitting opposite him at the little wooden table. "Say, my name is Myron Castleman," Castleman said. "I work for Glamdring and Glamdring up in the Stoebler Building on Forty-ninth."

The plump woman looked at him, surprised at the breach of Manhattan anonymity. Then she seemed to decide that he was all right, that she could give him information without his using it in some unspecified way to take advantage of her. "Dolores Park," she said. "I'm a legal secretary. Sometimes I have lunch with friends, but I came out alone today."

A waiter arrived and they ordered. Castleman nodded in self-confirmation when Dolores asked for French fries with her Roquefort-baconburger. He also noted that she wore no ring on her left hand, not that that meant much nowadays.

"Do you live in the city, ah, Miss Park?" he asked her.

She shook her head. The flesh on her cheeks and neck, although excessive, was still firm. It did not wobble as she moved. "No, I come in on the Long Island. I live in Roslyn." She paused as if surveying Castleman closely. "With my mother."

Castleman said, "Oh."

"And you?" Dolores Park asked.

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"Oh," Castleman said again, "yes, I live up in the Seventies, East Seventy-third." He looked at the clock again. This was getting him nowhere, and his stomach was beginning to gnaw at him. It was already twenty minutes to one.

Dolores Park said, "What do you do for Glamdring and Glamdring, Mr. Castleberg?"

"Man," said Myron.

"Man? I don't understand."

"Castleman. Not Castleberg."

"Oh, I'm sorry,"Dolores said. She seemed to wilt.

"It's all right," Myron comforted her. "Don't think of it, names aren't important, you'll forget all about it in a few minutes anyhow.

"I'm a personnel manager. In charge of corporate recruiting and career development."

"Oh," said Dolores, "that sounds very exciting."

"A daily bacchanal," Myron said, "look, here comes our food."

The waiter dropped Myron's cheeseburger in the middle of the table, threw Dolores's lunch at her, and dropped a single check into the jar of piccalilli relish that festered in the middle of the table.

"Ooh," squealed Dolores, "that waiter was terrible! I ought to report him to the manager. I've never had such rude service in this place."

"Never mind," Myron told her. "Better eat your food quick or it'll be too late." He dumped a glob of ketchup onto his cheeseburger and took a large bite of it. He savored the mixture of flavors, the toasted bun, the spicy seasoning, the rare meat and hot, melted cheese. As he chewed he let his eyes rove the room.

A cake tray on the counter held a delicious-looking devil's food cake with dazzling white icing and mahogany-brown chocolate shavings scattered across the top. Maybe I should have ordered cake instead, Myron thought. Maybe I'll have the cake instead of the cheeseburger next time I come in here. Maybe on the next resumption, maybe not, but soon.

He swallowed his cheeseburger and smiled at Miss Park. She was chomping on a length of raw carrot. "Enjoying your food?" Myron asked.

She nodded yes.

"Good," Myron said. He began to hear the familiar crackling, splitting sound that preceded each resumption. "I'm glad you like it, Dolores, since you'll get to have it again. Good-by," he said.

Dolores looked at him, surprised and puzzled by his remark.

There was a single, loud sound resembling the sound made by the implosion of air into a shattered vacuum tube or the report of a small-caliber firearm. Castleman

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experienced a confusing instant during which he was never able to tell whether there was a flash of light or of darkness, a rush of sound or an instant of total silence, a full-capacity loading of all the senses or a total deprivation of sensation.

Then there was the echo of that single, loud sound. The clock on the Grand Central Tower said 12:01, as it always did at resumption time, and Castleman knew that the dateline on the newspapers being hawked at the corner of Lexington and 46th would be the same as it always would.

He checked his personal appearance briefly, using a plate-glass window in a House of Cards shop as an impromptu looking-glass; as he expected, it was the same as always. He licked the heel of his left hand to get a little moisture onto the skin, then used it to try and make that stubborn lock of hair lie down.

The day being as pleasant as it was, he decided that it would be pleasant to spend his hour strolling down to the library and relaxing on the steps in the warm sunshine.

He walked toward Fifth, planning to stroll down to 42nd Street that way. A little past Madison Avenue he stopped and looked in through the front window of a Hamburger Heaven. Inside, a short line of patrons waited for seating. He could see a familiar figure standing at the end of the line, a woman slightly overdressed and overweight, but still fairly smart looking. Hi there, Dolores, he thought to himself.

For a moment the notion of entering the restaurant and making conversation with her flitted through his mind, but he rejected it with hardly a moment's consideration and walked on toward Fifth. As far as Dolores Park was concerned, she'd never laid eyes on him in her life. She would be puzzled at a stranger's talking to her, calling her by name. It would only spoil her hour, and even though it would be wiped out at the next resumption, Castleman didn't have the heart to do that to an innocent stranger.

He reached Fifth Avenue and walked downtown toward the library. He went past the Israel Bank, stopped and examined the window display at Record Hunter, then waited for the lights to change and made his street crossings, to the downtown side of 42nd and then to the west side of Fifth.

He glanced at the newspapers on sale at the corner. There was the *Times* with its staid front page, the *News* with its screaming headline and a photo of a train wreck near New Brunswick, and the first edition of the *Post* with a blue banner proclaiming another chapter in the inside biography of Yosef

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Tekoah. The news stories of all three dealt with the prediction of Nathan Rosenbluth that a disfiguration of time would shortly take place, with the entire world snapping backwards for the period of an hour, to resume normal progress as if nothing had ever happened.

Castleman laughed bitterly at the front pages and their different approaches to the story, then ambled down the broad sidewalk, stopped in front of the giant neo-Grecian library and began to ascend the long flight of steps toward its portico.

Near the top of the stairs a small group of young people were seated, talking. An intense young man was holding forth, his eyes glaring through tiny, wire-rimmed glasses as he waved his arms with each sentence.

Castleman stopped a couple of steps below the group and listened.

"Rosenbluth is absolutely right," the young man was saying. "The world has come to a state of affairs where things cannot go on any longer. We have to repair the social order to get things going again, or we'll soon be stopped at one place; we'll have to go back. The administration in Washington...."

He got no further, cut off by another young man, a round-faced individual sitting patiently with a spiral notepad and pencil in his lap. "You don't understand, Oswald," he interrupted the intense man with the beard. "Rosenbluth isn't talking about the social order at all. He's a physicist, and he's talking about purely physical phenomena."

"Besides," put in a slim, short-haired girl with faded jeans and a moderate case of acne, "LIU. I mean, a physicist from LIU. If he was from Columbia or even City College...."

"With imperialist forces threatening all people's progressive movements on every continent," the first speaker resumed, "how can you waste your energy quarreling about physics? Radical and revolutionary elements in every stratum of society...."

The round-faced man said, "If you'll just stop emoting and listen for a minute, I have the figures right here." There was a brief silence as he brandished his notebook. Castleman saw that the page was indeed covered with finely penciled mathematical calculations.

"From LIU," the girl in jeans said.

"Look," the round-faced man said, "Rosenbluth claims that the total energy content of the universe we live in is mirrored by a counteruniverse made of antimatter, coexisting with our universe in terms of three-dimensional space

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but separated from us by a fourth dimension or vibrational plane."

"Betrayal of laboring masses by yellow-dog sellout trade union bosses," put in the intense man.

"Yes, Oswald," the round-faced man continued. "Rosenbluth claims that by random but not acausal processes the two universes, moving in opposite temporal directions, attempt to emerge from their dimensionally separated states and merge. If this should come about, they would cancel each other because of their opposite energy polarities, but the phenomenon of opposing time-vectors prevents this, and they will instead rebound from each other, each universe snapping backwards into its own past — that is, the other universe's *future* — and...."

"How far?"

"Hah?"

The girl in jeans said, "How far will it bounce?"

"Oh," said the round-faced man, "Rosenbluth claims an hour."

"Just like daylight-saving," said the girl. "We bounce back an hour then. Or do we go forward an hour?"

"Spring ahead in spring, fall back in fall," Castleman put in, inserting himself into the conversation.

"Yeah, thanks, mister," the girl said.

Castleman hunkered down on the step between the girl and the intense man with the beard, facing round-face. "You don't think Rosenbluth is right?" Castleman asked the mathematician.

"No, I don't. If Rosenbluth were right, what would happen after the bounce? We'd resume normal temporal processes and so would the counteruniverse. But since our bounce into our own past would put us in their future and their bounce would put them in our future, what would happen next?"

"What do you think?" Castleman asked.

The round-faced man studied the math on his lined papers before replying. Castleman used the time to lean over toward the girl with acne and examine the old watch pinned like a brooch to her blouse. It was very nearly one o'clock.

"Better think fast," Castleman told the round-faced man. He was already hearing the familiar crackling sound. It was hard to tell just what the sound reminded him of — a hard-boiled egg being peeled? Chinese sizzling-rice soup?

The round-faced man said, "If that happened, why, after the hour was up again the two universes...."

There was a single, loud sound resembling that made by the implosion of air into a shattered vacuum tube or the report of a small-caliber firearm.

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Castleman looked up at the clock on the Grand Central Tower. It was 12:01.

Castleman sighed once, took a deep breath and started to walk briskly toward the West Side. Just before crossing Vanderbilt Avenue he stepped down from the curb, dodged a yellow taxi halfway across the street, and passed between two Cadillac limousines waiting at the curb.

He headed up Madison Avenue to 49th Street and entered the Stoebler Building, took the elevator up to Glamdring and Glamdring and pushed open the heavy glass doors that marked the entrance to the company's headquarters suite.

"Back so soon, Mr. Castleman?" said the receptionist as he strode past her desk.

"Decided to skip lunch today," Castleman told her.

"But it's so lovely out today, hardly any smog, and it's warm for early spring. I think I'd just take a walk even if I didn't have an appetite."

"Another time," Castleman said.

He walked down the corridor to his own department, went into his private office and sat down behind his desk. He looked at the digital clock beside his note box. It was 12:09 PM.

He picked up the telephone, punched local and got his own secretary on the line. "Stephanie," Castleman said, "do me a favor. Would you get information, find out the number of Long Island University, and call a Professor Nathan Rosenbluth. I'm not sure what department he's in, probably physics or math."

Stephanie's voice came back briefly.

"Yes," Castleman said, sighing, "Rosenbluth the time-bounce man. Oh, he was on TV this morning? Fine. Yes, see if you can reach him. Yes, ring me back."

He hung up the telephone and reached for a copy of this morning's *Times* lying on a low table near the couch in his office. He reread the small story near the bottom of the front page, about the professor — ah, it was physics — who had predicted the odd time-bounce phenomenon. As far as Castleman could figure out — but his telephone rang.

"I have Professor Rosenbluth's secretary," Stephanie said. "But she claims he's swamped with calls and not taking any."

"Ahah," said Castleman, glancing at the digital clock on his desk. It was 12:17. "Look, Stephanie, I can understand how the guy feels but this is really urgent. Pull rank — tell his secretary that it's a big shot in Glamdring and Glamdring, pull out the stops. Yes, the works. Thanks." He hung up.

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He threw down the *Times* and picked up the *Wall Street Journal.* There was a one-paragraph summary of the Rosenbluth story in the *Journal's* world news roundup column. It gave the same information that all the other versions gave. Castleman dropped the *Journal* in his wastebasket and looked at the clock again. It said 12:27. In thirty-three minutes he knew that he'd be outside near the Grand Central Tower again and that the *Journal* would be back on the coffee table along with the *Times* in his office. He pushed his chair back from the heavy desk provided by Glamdring and Glamdring, pushed himself out of his seat and strode around his office impatiently, glancing out the window toward the East River and the factory smokestacks of Long Island City beyond.

His phone rang and Stephanie's voice said, "Professor Rosenbluth on the line, Mr. Castleman."

Castleman gripped the receiver tightly to his ear, looked at the digital clock again — it was 12:31 — and heard his own voice say quiveringly, "Professor? Listen, Professor Rosenbluth, about your theory of time snapping backwards...."

"Yes, yes," the voice came back from the receiver, "I know about that, it is my theory, everyone knows that, you do not have to tell me about it. What does Glamdring and Glamdring want of me? I am available on a consulting basis. They can hire me by the day. My rates are very reasonable."

"Professor, listen please. I happen to know that your theory is absolutely correct, but the bounce has already taken place."

"Nonsense, nonsense. Are you a mathematician? Are you a physicist? Are you a scientist? How can you claim to understand my theory? Have you read my papers? What is your name, young man?"

Castleman swallowed.

"Hah?" asked Professor Rosenbluth.

"My name is Myron Castleman."

"Of Glamdring and Glamdring? Yes? Yes? That's a very good firm, a very big firm. I am not prepared to resign my professorship as yet, but I am available on a consulting basis. What precisely do you require, Mr. Castleberry?"

"Professor, what I want to know is, once the bounce happens, when we get back up to the moment we, ah, bounced from, what happens then? Won't we just bounce again? Won't we get stuck at one point and just keep repeating that hour?"

"No no no, Castleberry. No, no. The energy of the temporal redisplacement will be dissipated, and we will pass through the point

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of intersection with the counter-universe and no one will ever even notice it. That is the beauty of my theory. That is its greatness, its elegance. Do you understand scientific elegance? Economy of detail? Parsimony? How can you comprehend me?"

Castleman looked at his clock. It said 12:51. "Professor," he said desperately, "once the bounce takes place, everything is restored to its previous condition. The world is set back exactly where it was. Only nobody notices because their minds are set back too. Don't you see?"

"What are you trying to do, Castleberry, horn in on my theory? I don't think I can talk to you any more. You are trying to steal ideas. If you want my services, you have to hire me. I cannot afford to give away my thoughts. How can I support myself? How can I support my family, Castleberry?"

"Everybody bounces back and forgets everything that happened during the bounce, but I don't. I don't! Do you understand me, professor? The whole world is stuck here, recycling this single hour!"

He looked at his clock. 12:52.

"Professor Rosenbluth," he said, "in precisely eight minutes the world is going to flash one hour into the past. From one o'clock it's going to go back to one minute after noon. Everything will be restored to its condition at 12:01. You'll be back doing what you were doing. I'll be back outside my office, standing near Grand Central.

"Nobody will remember this hour. It will, uh, unhappen. But *I* remember! I've relived this one hour over and over!"

"Mr. Castleberry," the professor's voice came sharply, "I am a very busy man, but I will give you a few more minutes. Here is what you must do. Stay there on the telephone. When the time is up, I will still be here as well. That will disabuse you of your silly notion."

Defeated, Castleman said, "Very well." He looked at his clock, waiting for the digital neons to flash 1:00. They did. There was a familiar crackling sound followed by a single, loud report.

With the echo of that crack still in his ears, Castleman looked up at the Grand Central Tower clock. It said 12:01. He turned ninety degrees and sprinted west, bouncing off startled pedestrians and recklessly dodging cars and buses as he crossed the avenues.

At Madison he turned and continued uptown, his sprint slowing to a dogged trot as his breath came with increasing difficulty. At 49th Street he entered the Stoebler Building, mopped his sweating forehead with a soft handkerchief while he waited for

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the elevator to arrive, rode up to his office and snatched up the telephone after brushing past the receptionist and his secretary with breathless grunts.

"Stephanie," he gasped, "get me Rosenbluth back!"

"Back, Mr. Castleman? I don't understand."

"I was just talking to — him." Castleman stopped, held the receiver away from his ear and looked at it as if to discover some secret in the official Glamdring and Glamdring beige plastic piece. "No, of course not. I'm sorry, Stephanie." He looked at the digital clock on his desk. It said 12:06.

"Will that be all, Mr. Castleman?" Stephanie asked.

He thought for a few seconds. "I want you to call Long Island University, physics department, and get me a Professor Nathan Rosenbluth. This is extremely urgent, Stephanie. I'll stay on the line while you place the call."

He dragged in a deep lungful of air while he waited. His eyes roamed to the low table where the morning *Times* and *Wall Street Journal* lay. In the telephone earpiece he heard Stephanie calling information, then placing the call to Rosenbluth's office, wheedling a line to the professor from his own secretary.

Then Rosenbluth's voice came over the line. "This is Rosenbluth. What is it? Who is calling from Glamdring and Glamdring? Don't you realize that I am a very busy man? What do you want?"

Castleman moaned. Well, give it a try anyway, he thought. "Professor," he said, "this is Myron Castleman at Glamdring and Glamdring. We were talking on the phone just a few minutes ago, do you remember that?"

"Nonsense," Rosenbluth's voice came sharply. "I never heard of any Castleton, never spoke with you, and besides I just arrived here from conducting a doctoral seminar. So I could not have spoken with anyone on the telephone."

"I'm very sorry to have disturbed you, sir," said Castleman. Slowly and carefully he hung the receiver back onto the telephone desk set.

His digital clock said 12:22.

He stood up and walked around his office again, stopping to gaze out the window at the grime of industrial Long Island City. Of course, for all that Rosenbluth was the one to discover the time-bounce phenomenon, he was as much subject to its influence as someone who'd never heard of it. Castleman could talk to him all he wanted, could possibly even convince him of what was happening during the hour-long period of a resumption, but once the bounce took place and

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time resumed its progress — for a single hour — Rosenbluth would be back at 12:01 just like everybody else.

What frustration, Castleman thought, if he ever did succeed in making Rosenbluth realize that the strange phenomenon he had theorized was an actuality, had taken place, and was recurring at one-hour intervals. At the end of the hour the next resumption would find Rosenbluth as ignorant as ever — and Castleman back at his familiar post looking up at the Grand Central Tower, the place where he'd happened to be at one minute after noon. Resumption time.

He picked up the phone again and buzzed his secretary. "Stephanie," he said to her, "I want to do some heavy thinking for the next few minutes. Please don't put through any calls or visitors until one o'clock."

He hung up, paced, stared out the window, paced some more and flung himself onto the couch. The peculiarity of the time bounce, as he mulled it over, was that the resumption of the earlier state of being not only set physical objects back to their former positions, it actually wiped out the events of the lost hour. Like daylight saving indeed!

With the lost hour *unhappened*, even memories of the time were obliterated. As far as anyone else was concerned, the hour hadn't been spent and then undone — it seemed never to have happened at all! Thus no one was aware of the bounce. They might be reliving a given moment for the fifth time, the fiftieth, the five millionth, and never notice it! And never get past one o'clock this afternoon, either....

The entire universe hung up on a single, sixty-minute period, eternally repeating the events of that hour. As Castleman contemplated the prospect, his head spun.

Strangest of all was the fact that he — and as far as he could tell, no one else in the world — retained his memory of the lost hour even after the bounce. He had already piled up a whole series of memories of that hour, and by recalling those experiences and by understanding the phenomenon, he could vary his behavior each time, while everyone else simply repeated the same hour over and over — except when Castleman influenced them.

Once Miss Dolores Park had had a different luncheon companion at Hamburger Heaven.

Once the trio on the library steps had had a fourth member for part of their debate.

Once — no, twice — Professor Rosenbluth himself had had odd phone calls when he got back to his office from conducting his graduate seminar.

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But those aberrations no longer existed even as memories for the persons they had happened to. Only Castleman retained those events in his mind.

It was a curious sort of immortality. Everyone in the world would repeat one hour, forever, and never realize that time had come to a quivering halt at that point. And Myron Castleman would be permitted to live forever, piling up experiences and memories, but each of only an hour's duration, each resumed at 12:01 PM on this balmy spring day in Manhattan, standing outside near the Grand Central Tower.

He looked at the clock on his desk and sighed. It was nearly one o'clock. He closed his eyes and folded his hands behind his head, waiting for the crackling sound.

A few minutes later — or perhaps it was an hour earlier — he found himself standing in midtown, looking up at the clock. He ran to the corner United Cigar Store, hurled himself into an unoccupied phone booth, dropped a dime in the slot and dialed his own office.

"This is Myron Castleman speaking," he began as soon as he heard his secretary's voice. "No, listen, this is extremely urgent. I want you to telephone Long Island University, physics department. Get hold of Professor Nathan Rosenbluth."

A query.

"R-o-s-e-n-b-l-u-t-h. Right. Tell him that I'm a big shot at Glamdring and Glamdring, that I have to talk to him immediately about his time-bounce theory. That I'm on my way now, and please to be ready for me, in the lobby.

"Tell him that it's a vital matter, and we must complete our conversation by one o'clock or all is lost."

A few words in response.

"Fine. Good."

He pulled open the door and vaulted from the booth, leaving the telephone hanging by its reinforced cord. He ran from the store, into Grand Central, fishing for a subway token as he ran. When he reached the lower level, he jammed the token into its slot, shoved through the turnstile, saw an express at the platform just closing its doors and managed to wedge an arm between the rubber seals.

Reluctantly the doors rolled open again, and Castleman collapsed into a vacant seat on the half-empty noontime train. He sat gasping for breath, feeling sharp pains in his chest and shoulder. With his right hand he pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and ran it around the inside of his collar.

When he reached his stop, the pains had partially subsided and he had his breath back. He climbed

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the stairs laboriously, crossed the wide plaza and pushed his way into the building where he hoped to find Nathan Rosenbluth.

Inside the lobby was a receptionist's desk manned by a bored-looking student. Castleman gasped his name and asked if Professor Rosenbluth was expecting him.

The student jerked a careless thumb over his shoulder, indicating a shabby-looking figure examining a wall plaque nearby.

Castleman staggered to the man and introduced himself. It was Rosenbluth. Castleman said, "We only have a few minutes." He looked frantically for a clock in the wall, saw one high on the wall behind the desk. It was eight minutes until one. He put his head into his hands and began to sob.

Rosenbluth said, "What's the matter? What kind of thing is this? Are you really the man from Glamdring and Glamdring? What's going on here? I'm a busy man!"

Castleman tried to explain his situation to Rosenbluth, tried to make him understand that the time bounce had occurred, was continuing to occur at hourly intervals. Rosenbluth seemed a mixture of disinterest and hostility.

Castleman's chest pains were growing worse. He could feel a cold sweat on his brow, feel perspiration dripping down his sleeves from his armpits. He pulled off his jacket and threw it onto the floor, pleading with Rosenbluth to find a way to get time flowing normally again.

"I don't want immortality," Castleman wept, "not this way, anyhow! Everybody else has it, but they don't know it! I know it and it's unbearable. I can't go on living this hour over and over!"

Rosenbluth demanded to know what evidence Castleman could give him.

Castleman looked at the clock. It said 12:56. The pain in his chest and shoulder became excruciating; a hot wave seemed to pass through his entire body, and he couldn't breath.

He pitched forward onto the floor of the room; but before he ever felt the impact of his body on the dirty terrazzo, a roaring filled his ears, a red film seemed to cover his eyes, and then everything went blank.

Death! Death was Castleman's last thought. Death, oblivion would help him to escape from the maddening trap he'd found himself in, would bring him dissolution and release from the terrible form of immortality that fate had thrust upon him.

There was total oblivion.

For Castleman, time was meaningless, but for the rest of the

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world, just over three minutes ticked away while Rosenbluth and the student receptionist worked over Castleman's inert form, massaging the chest and forcing air futilely in and out of Castleman's lungs.

Oblivion.

There was the echo of a single loud sound resembling the report of a small-caliber firearm. Castleman found himself looking up at the clock on the Grand Central Tower. His tweed jacket was back on his body, and an unruly lock of hair stood out over his left ear.

It was 12:01 PM.

Coming every month

Each month we publish a couple of pages of small print that are well worth your attention. We're talking about the F&SF Marketplace. If you're not doing a bit of browsing there each month, you're missing out on some unusual and interesting products and services.

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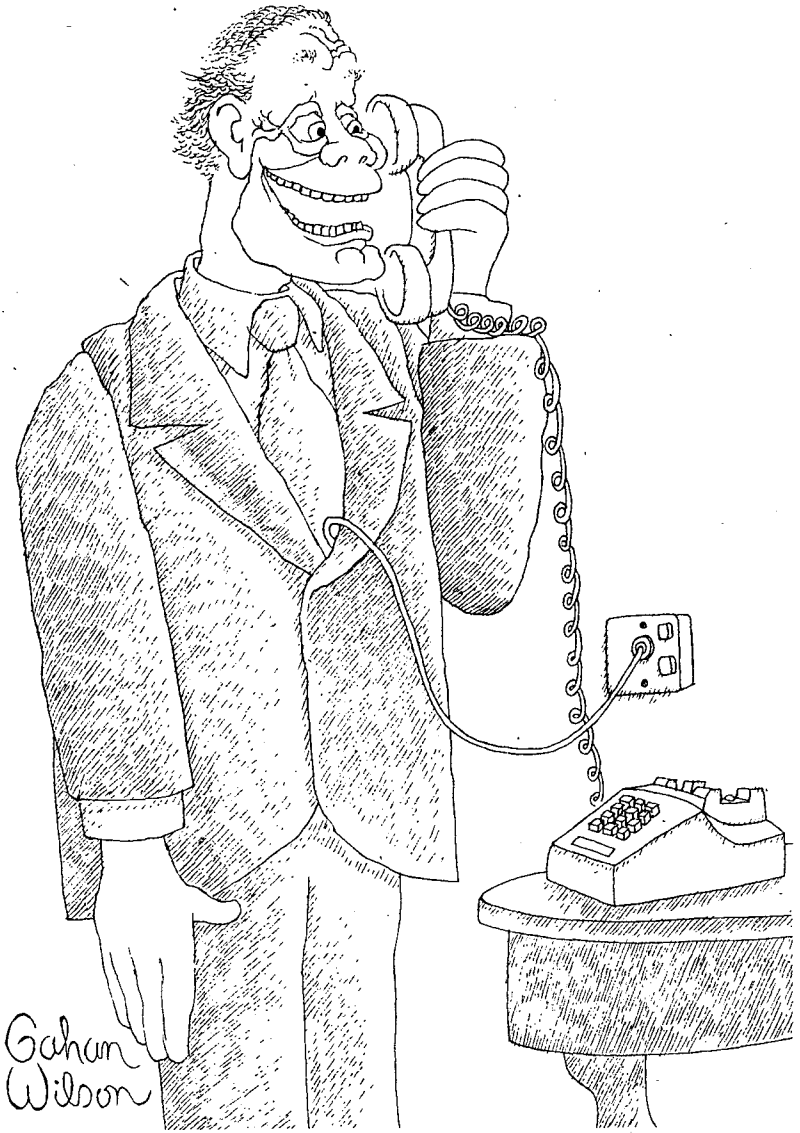

"Hello! You have reached the number of Harold Mayberry. I am sorry, but Mr. Mayberry is not in. I am a simulation of Mr. Mayberry. Please leave your name and number and Mr. Mayberry will call you back when he gets in. Thank you very much!"

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Here is some good, strong science fiction, the first of what will hopefully become a series about the character who comes to be called Blacklantern. Jack Williamson has been writing sf for some 40 years; his most recent novel is THE MOON CHILDREN (Berkley). Mr. Williamson is a professor of English at Eastern New Mexico University where he set up and still teaches one of the first college courses in Science Fiction.

The Power of Blackness

by JACK WILLIAMSON

1

The guide was a time-dried Nggonggan black, hopping ahead with dazzling agility on his one good leg and waving his single yellow-painted crutch like a banner to guide his company of tourists. They were a motley group of sunburnt other-worlders in bright shorts and black glasses. Nggongga was too hot for them, and most wore coolers that wrapped them in tiny individual cloudlets of condensation.

"Follow my crutch!"

He went bounding down the ramp to a reserved-seat section on the shady side, just above the barrier. His flock shuffled behind, grinning at his capers, squinting down into the painful blaze of the sun-flooded arena, gawking at the Nggonggan natives that packed the cheaper sunlit seats beyond it, a little apprehensively sniffling the rich scents of a world not yet fully sterilized.

"Respected guests of Nggongga, you are lucky today —"

Booming out of his scrawny frame, the guide's voice had an unexpected mellow resonance, but he had to stop for his listeners to adjust their translators and recorders to his Nggonggan clicks and gliding tones.

"Nggonggong-Nggongga smiles on you today," he resumed. "You are about to see a veteran champion risking his title and his life to an unknown challenger. Most of you on your own far worlds have heard of tly-binding — or you

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wouldn't be here. If you know anything, you know that it is more than a very dangerous game. It is a traditional ritual that reflects the history and the spirit of Nggongga."

Drums began to throb.

"The challenger!" The yellow crutch pointed. "A young man brave enough — or fool enough — to risk his life for glory...What's his name? Madam, he has no name. He was born outside the Nggonggan clan system, by which we are named. If he upsets the champion today, he'll be asked to join...Yes, sir, you could say he's fighting for his name."

Marching to the measured drumbeat, he came out of a dark archway. A lean youth, quick and supple, head held high, sweat bright on sleek black skin. He wore a flat black hat, a brief black kilt, a short jeweled dagger in a jeweled belt. Two black attendants marched behind, one trailing a black banner from a gilded lance, the other with a white pack rolled on his back.

"His weapon bearer," the guide boomed. "And his surgeon."

The three marched in single file to a wide circle of smooth black sand spread over the glaring white at the center of the arena, knelt before it while the drums paused, marched on toward the flag-wreathed stand where the judges sat.

"I know the boy." The guide's voice rose against the drum throb. "He used to clean my boots. An abandoned bastard. Grew up on the streets. An independent sort. He asks no favors and takes no orders. He's got brains and guts. He's coming up on his own, and I wish him luck....See that, sir?" He chuckled suddenly, waving the crutch. "He has found at least one friend, I see. He'll be fighting for more than fortune and a name."

The crutch picked out a striking red-haired girl leaning from a box near the judges. She screamed and waved until the challenger turned, screamed again and blew him a kiss. Nodding very slightly, he knelt to the judges again and turned with his attendants to face the black circle.

"You have a good guide today." The crutch tapped the floor, accenting the rhythm of the drums. "I know tly-binding, because in my own youth I was once a tly-binder. That's the way I lost my leg." He hopped and bent to listen to a sun-broiled woman, grinned and shook his head. "Another story, madam. Too painful to retell. But I do know tly-binding."

He waved away a grimy black urchin offering a basket of spiny native fruit.

"The last living relic of our historic..." He leaned again into the drifting condensation. "No,

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madam. He won't use the dagger. Or any modern weapon. Everything will be authentic. The costumes and the code have not changed in seven thousand years."

He hopped back to face his flock and raised his bugle voice.

"Respected voyagers of the eye, here you will find the real Nggongga. We've been touring our metropolis — Nggonggamba means Eye of Nggongga — but the city is not our world at all. These hotels and shops and tourist traps — they're an ugly scab, grown around the eye."

He scowled back into the fog.

"No, sir. I'm not speaking as a Nggonggan diplomat. Not even as a courier for Universal Travel. I'm only a native Nggonggan, saying what I feel. Nggonggamba, to me, is a rank thorn weed, planted by the traders who come through the eye for our rich metals and the richer scents distilled from our desert musk weed. But it is not Nggongga....You say the eyes bring progress, sir? What I call the eyes will not translate."

Listening, he fanned himself with the wide flat yellow cone of his Nggonggan hat.

"The machines of the eye, sir?...Yes, of course they are clever beyond imagination. Every man of reason must bow to those who understand how to fold our space through other spaces, to bring a doorway on one world against another doorway a hundred or ten thousand light-years off. I know it takes brave and able people to carry a new transflection station on a twenty-year flight or a fifty-year flight to open another new eye on another new world. But progress — for that new world?"

Swaying on his single leg, he flailed the yellow crutch as if to sweep aside the clinging cloud wisps.

"As you say, sir...But I don't speak of such new planets. I'm sure the eyes are fine for new worlds, where men have never been before. The colonists can step out into virgin lands, with all the gear they need. They can step back again, if they don't like what they find. But things were different, sir, when my own forefathers reached Nggongga, twelve thousand years ago. Space had not been folded then. Their starship had been in flight for forty years, and its fusion fuel was gone. Most of them were killed by what they found, but they had to stay. They could not refit or refuel their ship. Four thousand years had passed before the next one arrived."

He stabbed the crutch toward a fat man masked with white suncreams and harnessed with multiplex recorders.

"I speak of worlds like this one, sir. Worlds already old, rich with

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seasoned cultures of their own, when the eyes are opened on them...Yes, sir, I've seen others. Couriers travel, too...On every settled world it is the same. But look around you at Nggongga."

He whirled the crutch above his head.

"We Nggonggans had been evolving here for many thousand years. We are black because our sun is hot. We live in communal clans because our deserts are too harsh for men alone. We had shaped a way of life to fit our world. A harsh life, you may think, but it was good for us. I am sad to see it lost. We used to know what was true, what was just, what was good. Now nobody knows."

A quaver broke his mellow voice.

"Now, since those first galactic strangers in their starship brought machines to open the eye, our old world is sick. Hordes of sneering strangers came pushing through the eye, bartering bright new gadgets we never needed and spreading doubt of all we used to live by. They drained off our portable wealth and left such broken men as I am, grieving for the spirit of old Nggongga. When those first greedy robbers and desecrators went on to loot newer worlds, another waver of strangers came, like yourselves, to explore the wreckage they had left. To stereograph the ruins of our holy places. To record the relics of our lost culture. To toss a few coins at the broken human beings —"

The fat man's muttering checked him.

"No, sir, I'm not an anthropologist. I'm just an old Nggonggan. As poor as the boy yonder, except that I do have a name...No, sir, it's nothing you could pronounce, but people call me Champ...Till I lost my leg, I was a binder of tlys. Since, I've been escorting tourists for Universal Travel. Sometimes I long for my youth."

The drumbeat had changed, and he glanced into the arena.

"Here come the egg bearers."

They were two slim young black girls in crimson hats and crimson aprons, marching proudly to the drum, bearing the tly's egg between them on a cushioned litter. It was an ash-white globe, the size of a child's head.

"Listen." He held up the crutch. "You hear it screaming."

The faint shrieks rose fife-like above the drums as the girls reached the black-sand circle. Moving to the rhythm of the drums, they placed the egg at the center of that circle and drew back from it. Gliding through a ceremonial dance, they swept out their footprints with green-wreathed brooms from the litter. They stood

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facing the young challenger, who now marched slowly back with his two attendants to face them across the black circle and the screaming egg.

"Our most ancient history is represented here," the guide was chanting, in time to the drums. "Our pioneer forefathers came near failing to survive. The sun was too hot, the whole planet too hostile. The ultraviolet wilted their crops, and the native predators killed their animals. Some wanted to refit their starship, which was still out in orbit. But they could not reach it. Their shuttles had both crashed. They were desperate — until they found a hero."

He waved the crutch at the young contender, who was kneeling now, facing the girls and the wailing egg.

"The stinging things they called tlys had been their most savage enemy. These winged predators had been spoiling their fields and killing their cattle and even carrying children off to dens in cliffs that men could not climb. Now a young hero caught and tamed the first tly.

"The domesticated tly kept the wild ones off. More useful than the legendary falcons of old Earth, it caught edible game creatures on the uplands and brought edible fish from the sea. Others were tamed, and they kept the pioneers alive. In gratitude, they gave the young tamer a new name. They called him Ngugong — which means Sky-man."

Down in the arena, the kneeling challenger had risen. Removing the belted dagger, he buckled it on his weapons bearer, who tossed him in return a short length of rope.

"Yes, madam," the guide said. "Skyman used only a rope. The dagger is not for the tly at all, but for the binder. The tlys disable their game, you see, with a paralyzing venom which causes unending agony. No antidote is known. If the binder should be badly stung, it is the surgeon's duty to give him comfort with the dag —"

The drums abruptly stopped. With ritual shrieks, the two girls fled into the archway. The surgeon and the bearer retreated hastily toward the judges' box. The young contender stood outside the black circle, swinging the short rope and facing the whining egg.

"He is not allowed to step into the black," the guide whispered hoarsely. "Or to use any weapons save the rope and his own body. However, tradition does allow him one advantage over the old hero whose role he plays.

"The keeper of the tlys is allowed to milk the venom from the sacs, so that the sting is not always disabling. In these days the daggers

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are rarely required. My own leg was lost because my tly had not been milked with care enough. The amputation saved my life."

The drums rolled briefly.

"Watch! The tly!"

An iron gate clanged open. Sunlight burned on crimson armor, and the whole arena rang with a howling that seemed to have no source. On dead-black wings, the tly climbed and wheeled above the whimpering egg and the waiting man. Wings arrowed back, it dived.

The other-worlders gasped at its sleek deadliness. Burning scales flowed in graceful lines from five-eyed head to tapered tail. Its five-angled mouth yawned black to bellow, showing five flashing fangs spaced around a pentagon of jaws.

"The binder has a choice of several strategies," the guide was whispering. "He can try to mount the tly at a point above the wings, where the sting cannot quite reach. He can try to catch the sting itself, to break it off the tail. With clever footwork, he can evade the jaws. His aim is to tie the wings flat and disable the sting, so that he can carry the creature out of the arena."

He grinned into the condensation cloud.

"No, madam. The tly is not exactly a mother. The female tly is a helpless slug-shaped thing that never leaves the burrow. The males watch the eggs and feed the young. This creature is male enough — the sting is also a penis. Yet it's fighting for its egg, as you can see —"

The black challenger bounded nimbly on the balls of his feet and waited almost casually. The egg chirred behind him. The diving tly came level, sting reaching for him. The rope flicked upward — and a roar of triumph rolled across the hot arena from the packed sunlit seats.

The challenger was still easily erect, twirling the rope. The egg still squalled on the sand. The tly had flown on past. With a hollow yell that seemed to fill the hot sky, it climbed and wheeled to dive again.

"A cool man." The guide glanced briefly back at his staring flock. "He knows that the tlys strike instinctively at motion. He led its sting from his body to the moving rope."

As the tly came back from a new direction, the challenger danced and paused to wait between it and the egg. Again it came at him on black wings, a flashing red projectile. Again the rope flicked upward. Again it stung the air and hurtled on. The bright-kilted blacks were on their feet across the arena, roaring their approval. Thrown like boomerangs, flat bright conical hats began sailing

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out toward the wheeling tly and sliding back into the stands.

"No!" the guide breathed suddenly. "No —"

The roar of the crowd fell into a hush of taut alarm. The returning tly had dived lower. Now it came at the man not with its sting but with scarlet-armored bulge of its five-eyed head.

The encounter was a blur of motion, half obscured by furious black wings. In fragmentary glimpses, the other-worlders saw the lithe challenger in midleap over that crested head, saw him astride the tapered body, saw his rope whipping against the searching sting. Man and beast rolled on the sand, hidden in white dust rising.

The arena lay hushed, till a drum throbbed once. The contender stumbled out of the dust, bent with the weight of the hissing tly slung over his shoulder, black wings bound against its armor, broken sting dragging crookedly. The drums were thundering now, and many-colored hats sailed like strange birds above the staggering man.

"I think we have a new champion," the guide was murmuring. "The boy has earned his name —"

The drums stopped. Silence froze the crowd. The contender had stumbled again, reeling backward into the forbidden circle around the wailing egg. He slipped to his knees, and the tly flopped on the black sand. The last bright hats rained out of the air. In the stillness, the egg uttered a shrill little crow.

"The boy was stung!" the guide gasped. "The venom sacs of his tly had not been fully milked."

2

He stood swaying with pain from the venomed scratch along his upper arm. It washed him in unbearable fire, choked him with dry nausea, bathed the whole arena with murky red. It howled in his ears like a desert khamsin. It spun him into a tight cocoon of raw agony, and nothing outside mattered.

Yet he knew what was happening. He heard the egg chittering happily, heard the tly slithering out of the loosened rope, glimpsed it soaring away with the pipped egg safely wrapped in its quick prehensile tongue,

He watched the girl whose name-symbol was Sapphire. She had been halfway to him when he began to stumble. Red hair flying, white arms wide, green eyes smiling for him. Now she had stopped. Her bright eagerness faded into shock and pity and aversion. Suddenly she shrugged, bent to pick up a

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jeweled hat that someone else had thrown, scurried back toward her box.

His two attendants bustled past her. The bearer waved his lance foolishly after the tly, which was already gone. The surgeon swabbed at his wound, peered into his face, and reached for the mercy dagger.

No! I don't need that — not yet —

He thought the words, but his dry throat made no sound. Desperately, he tried to shake his head. The effort made the whole arena rock and pitch beneath him, but he could not be sure his head had moved.

"...wait." Fragmentary words broke through the gusts of pain. "...relatively superficial...survival... amputation...a crime the venom had not been milked..."

They took his arms, tried to walk him out of the arena. He resisted. Still he couldn't talk, but he tried to pull back toward the benches. He had to see what happened next. If the champion had to take the dagger, he thought the judges might still be forced to declare him the winner.

"Come on, kid." The surgeon tugged at him. "If you want to keep your arm —"

But now he could hear the drums again, beyond the walls of pain. They were a faint, far rattle, like footsteps in dry grass. The two men muttered and helped him to the benches. Swaying between them there, blinking across the barrier, he watched the champion strutting in.

A man of the Wind clan, the champion had a name. It meant Storm Stalker. Perhaps he had once been as noble as that title, but time had begun to overtake him now. His belly bulged too far above his dun-colored kilt, and his massive muscles shone with too much sweat.

Yet the black stands screamed a welcome, and thrown hats swarmed like bright moths above a light. He knelt to the judges, knelt to the egg. The drums paused, and the handlers released his tly. It looked smaller than the boy's had been, its flight erratic and slow.

"A sick one!" he heard his surgeon muttering. "Or perhaps underfed."

Through a dull haze of pain, he watched the contest. Three times the tly dived at the black sand circle. Three times the Stalker led it by with an easy flirt of his rope. Three times the hats sailed out from the roaring stands.

On the fourth slow dive, the tly seemed to waver. The champion flicked the rope to lead it down and sprang heavily upon it. The thin red tail struck and struck, but the stings had no effect. Man and tly toppled into blinding dust. Though

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what happened was hard to see, the boy thought the black wings had stopped flapping before they were bound.

His fat blackness splotched with wet white sand, the champion knelt to the judges, knelt to his shrieking fans. Panting through a gap-toothed mouth, he bent to hoist his lifeless tly.

"Stalker!" Sapphire was screaming. "Stalker — you promised the egg to me."

The boy turned his throbbing head enough to see her scrambling down from her box. The champion nodded to his men. The bearer picked up the egg and brought it to meet her. She brushed it aside and ran on to seize the Stalker's sweaty arm. In a final hail of hats, he stumbled out of the arena with the clinging girl and his limp-tailed tly.

As the cheering died, the boy limped stiffly after them. Dirty urchins were picking up the hats, but they paused to mimic his painful gait. His bearer had to push them aside with the black-bannered lance.

The sun was suddenly too hot, the air too thick to breathe. His feet began to drag the sand. The jeering of the urchins became a senseless howling. The walls of pain turned dark around him, and he knew that he was falling.

He waited for the dagger.

But then the sun was gone. Dimly, he recognized the low gray walls of the dying room — the surgery beneath the stands. Vaguely, he wondered how much time had passed. Faintly, he could remember the tiny hiss of red-hot needles thrust into his wound and the choking reek of burnt tly scales that was supposed to drive away the venom.

He remembered fragments of a quarrel. His surgeon's voice, shrill with anger, protesting that his clan had handed down their secret remedies five thousand years. The worried chief handler, insisting that the new doctors who came through the eye had better medicine than the dagger.

He didn't know how the quarrel came out. He lacked the life to care. But a pale young stranger in white was bustling around him now. He felt cold metal that stung like the tly, heard the click and hum of unknown devices, relaxed at last beneath a warm red glow. The pain began to drain away. He wanted to thank the pale man, but he was too sleepy to say anything.

He woke again in the dim cool stillness of the dying room, somehow quite alive. Stretching himself, he found no pain. Even his arm felt smooth and sound, where the scratch had been. His body moved well when he sat up, and he felt a pleasant stab of hunger.

His attendants and the pale

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man were gone, but an old black came shuffling toward the bed. A handler he knew. Although the man had never been a binder, his leathery skin was seamed with accidental scars, his gaunt frame stiff and palsied from accidental stings.

"Lad — lad!" His shrill voice cracked. "I've been waiting to beg your forgiveness." He knelt beside the bed. "It's all my fault you are not the champion."

He ducked the boy's clutching hand.

"There's a stranger — a gray-skinned other-worlder called Wheeler. One of those rogues who come through the eye to prey on Nggongga. An importer of forbidden drugs. A crafty gambler. He bet on the champion. Arranged for you to lose."

"You —" The boy slapped the bent bald head, before he could check himself. "What did you do?"

"Mercy, lad!" he whimpered. "I'll tell you everything. I was the milker. They had come to the arena to look over the tlys. Wheeler and the champion. A whore with them. They whispered together, with their translators set for privacy. Then the champion spoke to me.

"He made me promise to leave poison enough in the sacs to cripple you. In return, he promised that Wheeler would bet five hundred gongs for me and take me along to a richer world beyond the eye when he went on. — Don't hurt me, lad!"

His gnarled hands lifted, twisted and trembling from old stings.

"I did try to put them them off. Believe me, lad! I had always been an honest handler. I like your courage and your style. But I'm an old man, remember. I've been stung too many times. When I tried to say no, Wheeler promised that his other-world doctors could stop the pain that twists me. So I did what they wanted."

"I — I forgive you," the boy whispered. "But not the Stalker!"

"Now they won't — won't pay me!" Bitter tears burst out. "Wheeler says he never saw me. The champion kicked me out of his way, and his whore laughed at me. They say the stings have curdled my brain. That's why I came back to you."

"Why tell me?" The boy laughed harshly. "I have no clan, no name, no rights. The entry costs took all I could raise. All except my hat and dagger. What can I do?"

"Kill the Stalker!" the old man gasped. "Kill Wheeler, too!"

Trembling suddenly, the boy slid to his feet. He shoved the old man aside, snatched his dagger belt from its hook behind the bed, buckled it around him.

"Why not?" he breated. "What have I to lose?"

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"Wait, lad!" The old man whined. "What I've told you is only half the story. Both tlys were fixed. Yours unmilked. The other drugged and dying."

He turned back, staring.

"Another handler told me. Wheeler's girl promised him money — three hundred gongs bet on the champion — to slip the Stalker's tly a black capsule with its last feed. When the handler pushed it out to meet the Stalker, he says it was already weak and twitching. But now he says the whore won't pay."

"So I should kill all three?" The boy chuckled. "Perhaps I will."

He clapped on his black hat — the color of the clanless man. He thumbed the dagger's edge with a bleak black smile and strode out of the dying room into the clangor of Nggonggamba. Somehow, in spite of the tly's sting, he felt quite fit. All his pain was gone. Each bounding stride felt good, as if that pale outsider had oiled every joint, restrung every muscle.

An open freightway gave him a heady whiff of musk weed. He breathed deeper and walked faster. The gaudy towers all looked brighter, the rush of the rolling ways sounded louder, the tly pens behind him stank with a sharper fetor, as if his senses had all been renewed. He found himself peering aside into the glittering perfume shops and ahead at the mobs of black-skinned workers and the paler troops of merchants and shoppers and lovers and tourists, as if they had all been new.

The odor-lure of an eating place wet his mouth and stabbed him through with hunger — the quickest, keenest, brightest hunger he remembered. Searching his belt, he found one worn iron five-gong coin and a bright two-gate bit of portal money. Enough for dinner and a tip. He walked inside to eat. Stalker and Wheeler could wait. After all, he felt too good to kill anybody. Perhaps, over good food and drink, he might decide to forget —

"Hold up, boy!" The black doorman stopped him. "See that sign?"

It was the swirling disk of rainbow color that meant *clansmen* only. Beyond it, he saw old champ hopping nimbly about the tables, waving his crutch at the bowing waiters seating his pale other-worlders.

"They aren't clansmen."

"Honorary clansmen," the doorman snarled. "You get out."

That turned his hunger into anger. He clutched at his dagger, let it go again. It was not the stupid doorman but the Stalker who had earned it.

In the native market, he shopped for a weapon. Wistfully, he tried the balance of the sleek

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man-guns, weighed the tapered rockets, peered at the cunning booby-bombs. Each was priced at many hundred gongs. So were the night glasses, the seismic traps, the chemical trackers. He was fingering the lower priced knives and poison darts and lethal baits when a clerk frowned at his black kilt and began asking whom a clanless man had any right to kill. He spent his five gongs for a hunting lantern, and the two-gate bit for glasses to see its light.

The builders of the eye had chosen an arid site on the arid planet. The portal itself stood on a rocky ridge between a dry salt lake and a narrow arm of Nggongga's single landlocked ocean. The new city ringed it now with enormous looming towers that mixed the styles of a hundred other worlds. Power plants and rolling ways honeycombed the rock beneath. New barge docks lined the ocean inlet, and new air pads dotted the ancient lake.

Only the arena was old. It stood southward on the same ridge, with an awesome view of desert and sea. Once it had been the common ground of a dozen roving clans, with domesticated tlys allowed to burrow in the cliffs around it, but the mirror-domed suburban villas of wealthy other-worlders shone on the slopes below it now.

Storm Stalker was a Ngugong of the Wind clan, and his loyal clansmen had long ago rewarded his prowess with the historic fortress of his clan, which perched like a resting tly on a naked peak above the arena. Though it was two thousand years older than the eye, he had opened it to progress. The new robot keeper at the street door ignored the boy when he asked to see the champion.

Yet the boy was not defeated. Growing up in Nggonggamba without clan or rights or name, he had learned to use the dust traps beneath the rolling ways. He rode a freightway, climbed a disposal shaft into the castle, crept past the Stalker's sleeping attendants into the tower where he lived.

Nothing stopped him until the flitting ray of his lantern shivered and came back to the long rows of black heads grinning at him from the trophy cases in the hall. For one frozen instant, he felt as if the tly had stung him again. As he tried to breathe, his last qualms faded. The Stalker had also been a hunter of men. He dimmed the lantern and gripped the dagger and moved noislessly on.

The bedroom door was locked, but a roving other-worlder had taught him how to deal with bedroom locks before he was eight years old. Inside, he turned up his hunting light to fill the great stone

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room. He heard the Stalker's wheezing breath and found the ancient bed. Thick-pillared, covered with a khamsin canopy, it loomed like a dark inner fortress.

The old floor took all his skill, but he had almost reached the bed without a creak when an odor checked him — the rose-tempered musk that Sapphire wore. Though he tried to tell himself that he should not have been surprised, her scent shook him like an unfair blow.

He stopped where he stood, breathing carefully. When he dared move again, he pushed up the hunting glasses to make sure his light could not be seen and pushed them back to survey the huge room again — the massive old armoire that towered like a second fort beyond the bed, the alternating tly's eggs and black heads that decorated the high stone mantel, the window slits that looked out across islandlike airpads on the dark sea of desert.

Calm again, he framed his plan. He turned the black lantern high, its whole globe glowing, and placed it gently on the floor. He drew back into the shadow of the bed, lest the Stalker have hunting glasses of his own.

"Stalker!" His hand settled on the dagger. "Wake up, Stalker."

Sapphire screamed. Stalker's last snore became a grunt. His fat-jowled head thrust through the heavy curtains, darted back. The girl gasped something about "the stung man."

"You pitiful kid." The hoarse startled voice had a rasp of seeming sympathy. "A bad break you got." Behind the curtains, there was motion. "What are you doing here?"

"Asking — asking questions, Stalker." He had thought he was calm enough, but his voice tried to stick. "Why was I stung? What killed your tly? If I like the answers, I'll let you live."

"Fool kid!" That croaking shout failed to cover a click of metal and a scrambling in the bed. "You've been listening to some brain-stung handler —"

White light blazed. Feet thudded beyond the bed. The kicked lantern clattered across the floor. The Stalker loomed where it had been, crouching and blinking, swinging a heavy man-gun. The boy slung his black glasses away, threw his poised dagger, dived aside.

The rifle crashed once, rattled on the floor. With a soft, childlike cry, the Stalker toppled backward. Inside the canopy, Sapphire choked back another scream. The boy scooped up his lantern and the gun, got his dagger back. When he stood up, he found Sapphire trembling beside the bed, clad only in her long red hair.

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"No Name —" Huskily, she breathed the half-mocking term she had found for him the night after he first saw her in a tourist group old champ was leading through the arena. "No Name, you know I always — always wanted you to win."

"Once I thought you did." Half afraid to look at her, he bent to wipe the dagger on Stalker's naked belly. "But we're done with your game. If you still want to play, we'll play mine."

"With you, No Name —"

He felt her flowing motion toward him, and her rose-tempered scent turned him giddy. For a moment all he could hear was his own blood pounding.

"I'll play any game with you."

"I won't kill you, Sapphire." He pushed her back with the muzzle of the man-gun. "I'll even play fair. Show me his winnings, and you can keep half."

"You hurt me, No Name." She cringed backward. "There's forty — forty thousand gongs. There in his safe under the hearth. I said I'd play your game." She tried to smile, swaying toward him. "Just tell me, No Name."

"I'm sliding through the eye —"

He heard pounding boots and shouting in the hall.

"Your part is to get me out alive," he whispered. "If these seed eaters know you're here, convince them the Stalker isn't hurt. Maybe he shot at something in a dream. Dig up the loot. Find me a cooler-cloak to cover the gun. If you try one trick —"

"Trust me, No Name!" Her white arms opened. "Take me — take me with you."

"Not yet!" Grinning at her, he waved the man-gun toward the door, where the Stalker's people had begun to hammer. "First we've got my game to play."

3.

Old Champ was guiding a group of native black Nggonggans around the terminal complex. Members of the Sand clan, in brown hats and kilts, they were rare-earth miners and musk-weed cutters and crawler drivers from the equatorial uplands half around the planet. Rollways and towers and the eye itself had humbled them with awe, and he was snappish with them, suspecting that they disapproved the other-worlder custom of the tip.

"See that dome?" He waved the yellow crutch. "It covers the transflection portal."

They marveled at the dome, which was wide enough to cover the largest village in their desert highlands. They stared again at his agility, as he hopped up a rolling ramp and led them along the high

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gallery that belted the dome above the terminal doors. They gasped when he turned a section of the inner wall transparent, to let them look down into the dome.

"The portal," he bugled, in their own tonal dialect. "The eye itself."

The floor was a vast circular plain. Rollways entered it from hundreds of terminal entrances three levels deep, spaced all around the rim of the dome. They flowed together into six broad trunks, all at the same level, that converged into the actual eye.

"Monstrous!" A hulking miner shivered. "Forty yards wide — and looking straight at me."

"An optical effect," old Champ said. "The same from every direction. The blue iris is a circular image of all the other portals — some of them ten thousand light-years off in ordinary space. The black pupil — the engineers call it a circle of inversion — reflects the darkness of all the unknown spaces collapsed between the open eyes."

He waved the crutch at the unending streams of traffic — piled freight containers and crowded passenger floats — flowing into the eye on one side and out on the other.

"Ring-fields around the iris push the traffic through —"

"A forbidden thing!" A stooped weed cutter shrank fearfully back.

"People and things go into that eye and come out — different! Bales of weed turn to big black boxes."

"It only looks that way." Old Champ rapped the deck impatiently. "What goes in is scattered through other eyes to destinations on many thousand planets. What comes out here has been gathered from those same far eyes. A ticket through costs more than you have, but it does save travel time. A thousand gongs can save you a thousand years in a starship — if you could live so long."

He paused to let them gape.

"The operators and the inner guards are stationed on those six islands." He pointed at the triangular platforms that stood between the converging rollways. "They sort and watch the traffic. But what you see is less than half the eye. The computers and the power installations fill nine more levels, under the floor."

"Sir!" A curious crawler driver stopped chewing the sweet-seed that colored his mouth vividly orange. "Can we go down there? I want to see —"

"Not without your ticket." Old Champ snorted. "Not without your exit visa. Not without being screened for weapons and contraband and bad ideas."

"Why?" The driver looked for a place to spit and gulped uncomfortably. "I don't see why —"

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"Eyejackers!" snapped the guide. "A lot of con men and bigger thieves do get through the eye with loot collected on Nggongga — but they're the slick ones. The eyejackers are the fools. They rob somebody and turn up here with a gun or a bomb for a ticket. Every one gets caught, but more keep coming."

"How do they catch them?" The miner squinted through the crystal wall. "I don't see any guns."

"You won't see —"

The wall turned suddenly opaque, now the color of polished steel.

"Trouble inside — but we won't see it." Old Champ rapped with the crutch and hopped toward the ramp. "They've cut us off. We'll have to move along. Your good luck. Our next stop is a perfume factory, and now we'll have time enough to shop. The manager is my clan-kin. Highly reliable. If you decide to purchase anything, I can get you wholesale rates."

The boy had never been inside the portal dome, but he had begun cleaning boots and sometimes picking pockets on that sight-seer's gallery before he was seven. Tourists had told him of other worlds where all people had rights and a name was not too hard to earn. Never expecting to have the money or the right to buy legal passage, he had brightened many an hour of hunger and despair with schemes for illegal transit to some kinder place. That converging web of rollways was mapped in his mind, and off-duty workers had told him how the eye was run.

Now, with twenty thousand gongs in his belt, he might have paid his legal way, but he could not expect the dead Stalker's fans to leave him time enough to comply with legal regulations. He rode a low-level freightway into the dome, crouching between piled bales of cured musk-weed.

When it slowed to pass an inspection station, he dropped off the rollway behind the bales and slipped into a washroom. He waited there for an inspector, took the man's uniform and eye-badge, climbed a ramp to the main level, sprang boldly on a passenger float.

The man-gun slung across his back as if it had been official equipment, he moved briskly between the files of standing passengers, asking to see their departure papers. With a hard-won deftness, he extracted transit coupons from one folder, the visaed passport from another, gathered a medical clearance and a credit disk and a universal-translator, working his way along the float until it was entering the slot between two control islands, within moments of the portal.

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"Documents," he was rasping. "Departure doc —"

When he glanced up toward the eye, his voice caught. Already overhead, the brilliant blue flicker of the iris was many yards across. The black stare of that vast solitary pupil struck him with a terror as keen as his breathless hope. All around the iris was a haze of colorless nothingness — already swallowing the front of the float. In a few heartbeats, he would see a new world —

The rollway stopped.

"Get off!" That amplified command thundered from somewhere above, and blinding searchlights blazed down on him from the island wall. "Get off that float!"

Plunging into a knot of startled tourists, he unslung the man-gun.

"Eyejack!" He fired a short burst upward, at the island's crystal wall. "Cut the light!" he screamed through the slam and howl of his ricocheting bullets. "Take me through. I won't hurt anybody — unless you stop the float."

Crouching, he swept the shrieking passengers with the muzzle of the gun. The searchlights went out. The float lurched ahead. The eye swelled, till it was half the world. Men and women ahead toppled into the hueless nothingness around the iris. He would be next.

"Keep it rolling!" he screamed at the island. "Take me through —"

The rifle tore itself out of his hands to vanish into that flickering blankness, drawn by some savage force he could not see. Desperately, he plunged to follow it. Something smashed him back, as if he had struck an invisible wall.

Something hurled him off the float, crushed him to the floor. The searchlights blazed again. He was groping for his dagger, but heavy boots came thudding down around him. A gas gun thumped. He caught one bitter whiff, and the blinding lights dimmed again.

He lay sprawled on a wet metal floor, too numb at first to move. He was bruised, naked, drenched. His chest felt raw where the gas had burned him. When he moved his throbbing head, he struck a steel cell wall. Dagger and money and clothing were gone, even his translator. He sat hunched and shivering on the edge of the bare metal bunk, waiting miserably for anything to happen.

"Wake up, lad." A big paunchy black in the blue kilt of the Sky clan rattled the bars and hailed him in his own dialect. "So you're the rascal who stabbed the Stalker and tried to eyejack your way off the world?"

The boy nodded dully.

"Idiot!" The scolding tone was oddly mixed with kindness. "You

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never had a chance. I guess you got closer than most, but the operators can work those ring-fields like their own hands. I hear they grabbed your gun with a magnetic vector and tossed you back to the eye-guard gang."

"They got me."

"I see you've had a working over — but don't blame me. I just came on. I'll get you a towel and something to wear. Wait right here."

Chuckling heartily, he vanished and came back with the towel and a tattered black kilt.

"I saw you in the arena." He held the kilt while the boy dried himself. "Lost ten gongs on you — but don't mind that. I like the cool way you played that tly. I think you earned the title fair enough. I guess old Stalker stung us both."

"I killed him, anyhow." The boy grinned with a brief satisfaction. "But they've got — got me."

Something like a sob caught his voice. "What will they do with me now?"

"Nothing good." The guard clucked with sympathy. "The eyejack by itself would probably get you a free trip to the world they call Abaddon Nine. But the Stalker's fans won't let you get off alive. A mob of them is marching on the municipal tower. They want you hunted."

"That's their old tribal law." The boy nodded bleakly. "Stalker was a hunter himself."

When the guard was gone, the boy sat trying not to think about the grinning heads he had seen in the Stalker's trophy cases and arranged with tly's eggs on his mantel. He reviewed his eyejack attempt, trying to pick out his blunder, but he could see no blunder. He simply hadn't known how the ring-fields could be used to disarm a man and toss him to the cops.

"Come along, boy!" That cheery shout broke into his dismal abstraction. "Good news! Maybe a chance to save your head. An agent of the Benefactors wants to talk to you."

"The Benefactors?" He sprang upright and sat heavily back, resolving not to hope too much. "What's a Benefactor?"

"You'll find out." The guard returned his translator, squinted sharply at him, nodded in bland approval. "I think you'll do. Just speak fair to the agent. If you please him, he can take you through the eye to a better place than Abaddon Nine. Now come along."

Two levels up, the guard let him into a bright, quiet room where two others waited.

"No Name!" Sapphire ran to greet him with a hot wet kiss. She led him to meet her companion, a

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pale outsider with a puffy face and glassy eyes. "My friend Wheeler."

The other-worlder gave him a sullen stare.

"Don't mind Wheeler." The girl made a face. "Of course he blames you for his own arrest. But we're all three in this together — and we can all get out together, if we can only play the Benefactor's game."

"I think I've played too many games." The boy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stepped back from the hostile other-worlder. "What are Benefactors?"

"Friends of humanity, they say." Wheeler spoke in a raspy whisper. "No friends of mine."

"Play along." The girl glanced at the farther door and dropped her urgent voice. "Both of you. Promise to befriend the human race, if that's what the agent wants. Let him get us off Nggongga — before these black hunters take our heads. We can walk out later —"

Wheeler hissed softly to stop her. The farther door slid open. Two uniformed blacks stalked through, gas guns ready. A pale, worried portal official appeared behind them, the blue eye-symbol staring from his silver tunic. He scowled at the prisoners, called the policeman sharply out.

A tall man walked in alone. Wheeler flinched away from him, with a startled grunt. Sapphire gasped. The boy blinked and stared, trying to resolve his confused emotions of dread and wonder and even delight.

Standing very straight in a queer, close-cut uniform of some blood-red stuff, with a black weapon-shape at his belt, the stranger looked severely stern, till he smiled at the three. With the snowy hair flowing to his shoulders and the lines around his penetrating eyes, he looked old, until the boy saw the firmness of his deep-tanned flesh and his youthful ease of motion. His quiet voice carried invincible authority, somehow mixed with appealing warmth.

"Call me Thornwall." He paused to greet each of the three with a searching look and an oddly casual nod. The boy shrank a little from the blue directness of his eyes. The girl darted impulsively toward him, but Wheeler snatched her back.

"Sit, please." He waved them toward the chairs. "Before you speak, you should know that I'm here as an agent of the Fellowship of Benefactors. We've arranged this meeting to discuss the possibility that you might join us."

"We're ready, sir!" the girl cried. "You'll find us willing —"

"Not yet!" Wheeler rasped. "Let's hear the conditions."

"We've time enough." He

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leaned against the desk, smiling easily. "First of all, you should understand your difficult legal situation." Sterner than the smile, his blue stare probed them, one by one. "Here in Nggonggamba, you are subject to a triple jurisdiction. The portal complex has laws of its own, in force on many planets, recognized here by both the city and the adjacent clandoms. The city has its own legal authority, created by the treaty of entry. Under the same agreement, the aboriginal clans retain certain paramount rights, to which city and eye must yield."

The boy waited blankly for meaning to emerge. The words were a frightening jangle, yet he wanted to trust the voice that spoke them. Wheeler sat staring glassily when he looked at the others, and Sapphire was wetting her full red lips.

"Each of you is charged with grave offenses against all three jurisdictions." Thornwall's young face was warm and brown and casual, yet his old eyes froze the boy. "Yours include the killing of a treaty clansman, not yet avenged, armed robbery and transportation of stolen property within the municipal limits, and numerous violations of the portal code, even space piracy."

The boy gulped. "Guilty, sir."

"We're not concerned with guilt." A lean red arm waved his words aside. "Only with the truth."

The boy sat uneasily back, and Thornwall turned to the girl.

"My name-symbol is Sapphire." Very pale, she stood up as if somehow lifted by his pointing finger. "I was with Stalker when he was killed. I was caught at the portal with part of his stolen money."

"I believe you're also involved with him."

The finger moved on to the puffy man, who sat in stubborn silence.

"You face a long list of charges, Wheeler. You are accused of misusing the portal on many occasions, to ship illicit drugs, to dispose of stolen property, to avoid arrest. Here on Nggongga, the clans and the city officials suspect you of controlling a dope ring, adulterating perfumes and counterfeiting containers, even of fixing the tly-binding contest that led to this boy's arrest."

"No comment," Wheeler rasped. "My lawyers will speak for me."

"You have no lawyer here." Thornwall shrugged. "If you wish to petition for fellowship, you'll have to speak for yourself."

"No comment —"

"Don't be a lunatic!" the girl flared at him. "The Wind clan will get us all, if the Benefactors don't

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decide to save us. The clans don't like other-worlder lawyers, and you know how their law works. They'll turn us loose in some salt sink, naked in the sun and five hundred miles from water. They'll hunt us down with trained tlys and man-guns — and mount our heads for trophies!" She glanced at Thornwall and sank back into her chair. "Sorry, sir."

"I'm afraid that's an accurate statement of your situation." The tall man nodded with an unconcerned emphasis. "Under the treaty agreement, the portal municipal authorities will be compelled to release you to the jurisdiction of the clan."

"But you can save us?" The girl's green eyes searched him desperately. "You will save us?"

"That same treaty does grant the Benefactors a superior jurisdiction," Thornwall said. "But only over our own people. We are not yet ready to offer membership to any one of you. Perhaps some of you are not yet ready to accept. I want to explain what we are. Any invitation to join our fellowship will depend on your own responses."

4.

Old Champ was guiding a new tourist group into the perfumers' quarter when the rollway stopped, the street blocked ahead by a mass of chanting blacks in dun-colored hats and kilts. Most of his flock clustered uneasily around his lifted crutch, but a bold few ran ahead to multiplex the scene. One pale gangling youth picked up the chant in his translator:

"Kill!...Kill the killers!... Kill!..."

That brought the strays scurrying back, and he led the apprehensive group to a quiet concourse on the level below.

"Respected guests, you're in no danger." He waved the yellow crutch to collect the stragglers. "What you glimpsed is a unique survival of our native culture. One of our folkways not yet destroyed by the invasion of civilization."

He helped a flushed, perspiring woman turn on her cooler-cloak.

"No, sir, that's no mob." His mellow voice rose again. "Those are Wind clan people, demanding ritual justice. A clan Ngugong has been murdered. The people are simply asserting their right to punish the killers — a right guaranteed by both the city and the portal."

He hopped to hear some muttered protest.

"Madam, that's our law. Accused criminals are released out toward the center of our traditional hunting lands. Their accusers are permitted to pursue them to the death...

"Never, sir!" He banged the

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pavement for emphasis. "Our sacred hunts never endanger the innocent. We Nggonggans don't bring false charges, sir. If an innocent person should ever be accused, the holy hunters promise that our ancient deity would save him. Nggong-Nggongga would guide him to a temple of refuge only nine days away across the hallowed lands."

He held his hat behind his ear to catch a voice.

"Yes, madam?...Most certainly. Any of you can arrange to witness our ritual of justice. In fact, our Golden Desert Safari allows full participation. Competent bush guides escort our desert tours, with weapons and all equipment provided by Universal Travel....

"Legal? Of course it's legal. The holy hunts are sanctioned under the treaty of entry. The safari fee covers your special initiation into the Wind clan, and several of our field guides are visiting anthropology students who can help preserve and mount your trophies....

"Yes, madam. By all means. We guarantee a kill....You'll be living in the open, quartered in a flying camper, but there's no actual danger. Our people are competent, and the accused are given no arms. You can trust us, madam. Universal Travel has never lost a hunter!"

Sunk in a sullen apathy, Wheeler had been fingering his puffy jaw. Suddenly he cleared his throat and sat up straighter. From the faint sour reek of his breath, the boy knew that he had been triggering a stimulant implant under his skin.

"We're listening." His lax gray flesh had flushed, and his hoarse voice rose stronger. "We're interested in anything that will get us off Nggongga."

"That depends on you." Blue as the iris of the portal itself, Thornwall's eyes roved slowly over them, dwelling warmly on the boy, resting sadly on the girl, keenly probing Wheeler. "I must tell you about our fellowship.

"To begin with our reason for being, I suppose you are all aware that the human race has not yet reached any very lofty cultural level. A philosopher might say that technology has outrun ethics. We invent the transflection portals — then let them import crime and pain into such worlds as Nggongga."

Wheeler stirred angrily, and the girl hissed at him.

"I get your point." Thornwall tossed his long hair back. "We humans aren't ready for utopia. We aren't all alike. We're still more animal than mechanical. We need excitement and uncertainty, perhaps even violence. Even what we

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have is no doubt better than any static ideal state."

His eyes ranged over them again.

"From my survey of your separate cases, I know that you are all individualists, all in conflict with society. You need not conceal your hostilities from us — nor even past behavior classified as criminal. In fact, social independence can help qualify you for our fellowship."

Wheeler sniffed and stiffened.

"I don't mean that we're outlaws." The blue eyes stabbed at him. "If admitted, you'll be retrained — at one of our schools on some other planet. You will be required to obey our code. You'll find that strict. We aren't criminals."

He had seen the boy's protesting gesture.

"I know you dislike government. But we are not a government. We don't try to be. There has always been too much government. What is sometimes called the empire of man has now become too vast and too various to be governed at all, by any central authority."

"If you have no power —" Wheeler squinted at him shrewdly. "How can you save us from the clansmen?"

"We do have authority," Thornwall said. "But only what is granted to us freely, in fair exchange. We are committed not to use it to coerce anybody. I am here on Nggongga because we happen to agree with the portal people. We regard the portals as a way to continued human progress, and local portal officials often need our aid. We work together. If the clans should order us to go, the eye would be closed."

"That's what I understood." Wheeler raised his raspy voice as if he had scored a point. "So what do you do with this curious authority?"

"We defend individuals." Thornwall's brown smile warmed the boy. "From other individuals. From unjust societies. We support a code of individual rights. A right to learn. A right to choose. A right to act."

"So you spread anarchy?"

"An ideal anarchy, perhaps." He gave Wheeler a quizzical nod. "An individual who learns his own rights also learns the rights of others. When he is allowed a liberated choice, he commonly chooses humane paths of action."

"Noble noises," Wheeler snorted. "But I don't see the payoff. Where do you collect?"

Thornwall tossed his white hair back with a puzzled gesture.

"We don't collect taxes, if that's what you mean. We don't sell protection. What we offer is a way of life. You may fail to understand, but most of our fellows do feel

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adequately rewarded, simply with the way we serve mankind. We sometimes call ourselves the humanistic volunteers."

The boy sat tense with a troubled alertness, watching Thornwall the way he had once watched a tly's egg hatch. Even in his translator, the words rang strange. The swirl of ideas was hard to grasp. Yet, for all his confusion, the youth and strength and warm good will of Thornwall drew him, like sweet water in the great salt waste.

"We're a volunteer legion of progress." The red-clad frame leaned toward the boy, and the soft voice spoke to him alone. "We believe in man's great future. Armed with science — the weapon of reason — we champion the human cause. Sometimes we fight a hostile cosmos. Sometimes man's own backward nature. Often a fossil society, no longer alive —"

"Magnificent!" Sapphire was on her feet, flushed and eager. "I pledge — pledge my life to that ideal. I volunteer. I think we all do." She swung urgently back to Wheeler and the boy. "Don't we?"

"I want to keep my head," Wheeler muttered stolidly. "I'll go along."

The boy saw the girl's quick green wink, but still he hesitated. He felt her flash of puzzled anger, found Thornwall surveying him sharply. He was suddenly trembling, the way he had trembled in the hot arena while he waited for his tly.

"Young man —" Thornwall spoke very gently. "How do you feel?"

"Sir —" The word came strangely, and he had to get his breath. "I've never belonged to anything. I see that you mean well, but I'm afraid your fellowship is not for me. I don't like to take orders. Not from anybody. I think I'll take my chance with the hunters in the desert. I know how to deal with them."

"Simpleton!" the girl hissed at him. "You'll be killed." She caught Wheeler's arm and whirled back to Thornwall. "We two will go. We'll agree to anything you require —"

Her breathless voice faded when she saw him still looking at the boy.

"I see that you don't quite understand the Benefactors," he was saying. "We don't require you to take orders — or to give them. We hold that nobody belongs to any society he didn't join or doesn't accept. You may leave us when or if you please. We don't compel anybody."

Wheeler snuffed.

"Perhaps you feel compelled now." Amusement flickered on his dark-tanned face. "But the threats you face come from others, not from us. What we offer is life — a

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way of life — for those who qualify."

"Do we?" Desperately, Sapphire caught at his hand. "What do you want us to promise?"

"Nothing." Thornwall looked hard at her, his amusement fading. "All we need is to know what you are."

She met his eyes silently, her fair skin very white. Suddenly she gasped and reddened.

"If you don't take us, don't — don't trust him!" She swung on the boy, green eyes blazing. "We were speaking before you came in. We all agreed to say we'd go along, to save our heads. But we planned to desert you, as soon as we're safe."

"Such motivations are common enough." He paused to glance at Wheeler, who was again massaging his puffy jaw. "I haven't rejected anybody, though we do need to know more about the two of you."

The girl sank back into her chair.

"As for you, young man —" He paused, while the boy's heart thudded. "Would you accept a student fellowship?"

"Not — not yet." The boy gulped. "It's hard to tell you how I feel. But you see, I've never really had anybody else. I've always been alone. Whenever anybody offered me something I wanted, it turned out to be bait — bait for a trap." He glanced at the girl, and her bright image blurred. "Whenever I trusted anybody, I got hurt. You other-worlders have never done much for me."

"We aren't all alike. Remember your doctor? The man who cleared the tly venom out of your body? He was one of us."

"I didn't know." The boy looked resolutely away from the girl. "He was gone before I woke."

"Did you know you yourself have other-worlder blood?"

The boy squinted doubtfully.

"Perhaps we know more about you than you know about yourself. Your grandfather came here through the eye when it was new. A musk-weed trader. He lived with a native girl, one from the Sand clan. Of course they couldn't marry here — he was not allowed to join the clan system. When he could retire, he took her on to a more flexible society."

The boy sat tense and scowling.

"They had one son, who became your father. He stayed here to manage the business. Died before you were born. An official report says he was caught in a salt storm in the Great Salt Rift. There's better evidence that a rival weed trader bribed a Sand clansman to take his head.

"Your mother was a Water clan girl who worked in his office. Soon after you were born, she married a Wind clansman. The clan had no

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place for you. She gave you to a blind beggar."

"I remember her!" The boy caught his breath. "Actually, she had one good eye." He sat silent for a moment, watching Thornwall with a fixed intentness. "What are the duties?" he asked abruptly. "What exactly does a Benefactor do?"

"Nearly anything to aid an individual. I've helped a lost child find its home. We operate schools, labs, hospitals, libraries, communication webworks. Our agents have often come to the rescue of people falsely accused of crime —"

The girl was jabbing Wheeler.

"I'm afraid you can't qualify for that." Thornwall gave her a glance of wry apology. "There's evidently nothing false about the charges against you."

"Or against him!" She glared at the boy, green malevolence in her eyes. "I saw him murder the Stalker in his own bedroom."

"He has not denied it."

She shot a warning glance at Wheeler, who had begun to rub his jaw again.

"We defend individuals," Thornwall was murmuring. "Sometimes against the aggression of other individuals. More commonly against a bad society — bad in the sense that it subverts the rights and cripples the lives of those we seek to protect.

"Yet our defense is rigorously restrained. We use no violence except in our own defense. We do supply knowledge — commonly that is enough. Sometimes we offer tools, very rarely weapons. If other means fail, we can often avert violence by arranging escape through the eye. Does that appeal to you?"

"Sorry, sir," the boy muttered. "But I've never been beyond the eye. I can't see what you're talking about. Not the way I can see those hunters in the saltlands, with their rifles and their tlys."

"You'd like the work," Thornwall promised. "I've never found it dull. The assignments keep you moving. They're always different, and most of them are exciting. For one example, the portal people want one of our agents to go along with an expedition they're sending back to Old Earth —"

"The mother planet?" The boy sat up. "So it really does exist?"

"But it's in trouble," Thornwall said. "It slipped backward after the colonists were gone — sending out the starships had used up its best resources. It soon turned back from science and the notion of progress. Now its people have been isolated from all other worlds for many thousand years. When a portal was set up there, a few centuries ago, they wouldn't let it open. Since that seemed to be their own free choice,

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we felt we had no right to interfere. But things have changed. We have recently discovered a shadow of danger over the planet. The people must be told about it. The eye must be opened, for those who elect to leave. That's the duty of our agent —"

The boy had risen slowly to his feet.

"Could I go?" he whispered. "If I join?"

"Perhaps." Thornwall shrugged. "All I can do now is accept you for training. Your assignments can't be decided until you have passed the final tests for full fellowship — which aren't easy. But even if you don't get to Old Earth, you'll find other missions with the same sort of challenge."

The boy stood looking down at himself, shuffling his feet on the thick rug. He shot an unwilling glance at Sapphire and Wheeler, who sat with heads averted, whispering together. He pulled up the tattered kilt and frowned again at Thornwall.

"I think — I think I'll take a chance," he muttered. "On one condition."

"Watch him, sir!" Wheeler rasped. "He's the vilest scum of Nggongga. He knows every dirty trick there is. He'll con you if he can."

"I warned you what he was planning." Sapphire glared through the red disorder of her chair. "I know him, sir. I saw him butcher the Stalker. He's a slick black rat."

The boy flinched.

"You'll be surprised, sir." His voice was breathless and uneven. "I'd like to help save their heads — in spite of all they're saying. I'll go along, if you'll take them too. That's my condition, sir."

"No Name!" The girl stared blankly, red mouth wide. "I never get you." She whirled desperately to Thornwall. "Will — will you take us now?"

"Sorry, young man." Thornwall's face turned stern. "I can't make that sort of deal. Every Benefactor has to prove himself." He raised a lean red arm to stop the boy's impulsive protest. "Yet perhaps we can agree."

He swung to Wheeler and the girl.

"We can't yet accept you two for training, but you can still be useful. I can offer you at least temporary shelter in return for what you know about implants traffic. Agreed?"

"Agreed!"

Later, when Thornwall was preparing their exit papers, he looked up at the eager boy.

"Name?" A quizzical smile lit his eyes. "We need a name for you."

"Sir, I never had a name."

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"We'll find you one." He tossed his gleaming hair, and his eyes dwelt on the boy. "Something the translators can handle. Something reflecting your color and your past — and the future I see for you in our fellowship. Darkness, perhaps, and light —"

"I had a hunting lantern."

"Your emblem!" he murmured. "The black globe of the lantern, on its square black base, set against a field of glowing light. For your name —"

He gave the boy a strong brown hand.

"Welcome, Blacklantern!"

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In 1833, seventeen years after she wrote *Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley chronicled the even more remarkable life and adventures of *The Mortal Immortal*, who was at that date 323 years old. Here, discovered another 400-odd years later, is the apparently final fragment of his poignant life story. — *G.J.*

Ms. Found In An Oxygen Bottle

by GARY JENNINGS and MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY

I am alone. The gantries have telescoped and rolled away now; all but a few umbilicals are severed; the last personnel carriers are racing for the shelter of the hills forty miles to the west. A sweep of my viewer shows nothing but the vast cermet plain, porcelain blue in the moonlight, with here and there the tiny red laser eye of a holo-TV monitor that will continue to stare until the instant it vaporizes in my big bird's backblast. The count-down proceeds smoothly and inexorably toward T.

What I am writing here may be regarded as a prologue to the log I will be keeping during the long journey. I might have started it sooner, during the past eight days I spent sequestered in quarters, with nothing to do but wait and endure routine medical checks and wait some more. But every leaf of this logbook had to go through the anticontaminant treatments along with every other component of the ship's fittings. Somewhere during the sterilizing process, some autoclave technician would have been sure to glance at what I had written, and I would have been dead-lined immediately. The hopes of all Earth can't be entrusted to a seeming madman.

Despite the acknowledged fact that I am the one human being in the world best qualified for Project Janus, there would be no hesitation in yanking me and giving the mission to one of the backups — even now, at T minus 84 minutes — if my physio-psycho-sociogram showed any needle-flicker of aberration from a profile of two hundred and sixty-two straight A's.

They even fussed and fretted when I told them I would spend my terminal leave visiting a relative's grave in France. The Janus

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volunteer can have no living kin to bewail his departure, and ideally should have no least sentimental tie of his own to this planet.

"A very distant relative," I assured them, and I smile now to think of their consternation if I had told them *how* distant.

I found her gravesite rather sooner than I had expected. It is even possible that my transjet's drogues swept over it during the landing. It had been many years since I had last seen the place; even then the spreading exurbs of Limoges were obliterating what had been countryside. Now the whole area has been leveldozed as flat as despair and overlaid with a busy touchdown port, one of the feeder fields in the Westeur air traffic complex. Bertha's grave is somewhere under those many square miles of prestressed neocrete slab. It was impossible for me to find the exact place on that desert of neocrete to stand and bow my head and try to squeeze out a tear.

Nevertheless, there was a certain fittingly cemetery aspect to the scene. From the distant margins of the port, dimming into the horizonless smog, stretched the monotonously foursquare ranks and files of togetherment buildings, like titan tombstones. I might have been standing in some residential sector of Seaboard Megacity or the Sahara Metroplex.

At the time I buried Bertha here — with my own hands I dug her grave and rested her in it — this was one of the most fertile valleys of the Périgord, an Eden of greenery, songbirds, butterflies, bright sun and clean air, and the nearest signs of man were the humble thatches and half-timbers of our little village down by the river Dordogne.

But that was nearly six hundred years ago.

You see what I mean — that last sentence — how I dared not set down my reminiscences until now, when I am alone and there is no one to see what I write. According to all existing records, I am thirty-four years old, and even that figure hazards disbelief; I look nearer twenty-four. The Janus authorities were amazed that a man of thirty-four — even with the phenomenal academic record I had taken care to compile in the previous sixteen years — could have so much *practical* knowledge of rocketry, spatiatics and astrogation. I couldn't tell them that I had been employed in the field for some two centuries.

Why, I worked with the legendary pioneer, Warren Brown, in *his* youth — at Kummersdorf before World War II and at Peenemunde after it. (During his lifetime, which was long before the universal Anglover, Brown had a German name.) He and I watched

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together the first fumbling flights of the primitive A-4 and the Wasserfall. I helped him build the first Redstone rocket at Huntsville...but I had to make my disappearance soon afterward.

By that time, Wernher had aged and mellowed — he resembled a prosperously stout German bürger — while I had hardly changed a whit since the day we two met, when he was a teen-ager. Our co-workers at Huntsville could not help noticing the disparity. I began to sense again that dawning awe and suspicion I had encountered so often before. I vanished. This occasioned some turmoil in official circles, because at that time the world was politically divided and the two halves were antagonistically competitive. It was inferred that I had defected to the Other Side.

Which in fact I had. For a long time, I worked now in one country's space program, now in another's, alternating at discreet intervals and going by more different names than I can recall. Always, though, I contented myself with a subordinate and unpublicized role. If I had chosen, I could have joined or even preceded the now-legendary Gagarin, Armstrong, Begega, Podgorkin, or any of the other First Men to achieve this or that. God knows those early orbitings, probes, moon landings and interplanetary explorations were fraught with the danger I sought. But I could see that they were capable of accomplishment by ordinary mortals. All the time I told myself: wait. Wait for the most vitally important mission of all, the most hazardous mission ever undertaken by a human being, the mission that *no one* but myself would have any hope of carrying out. I had to wait this long, this long.

Project Janus. Named for the two-faced god, patron of endings and beginnings, gazing both forward and backward at once. When I look back after blastoff, for as long as Earth is a perceptible disk I will see its entire nightside agleam with the lights of human habitations; the land areas all cities, amorphously sprawling and blending into one vast overall terrapolis; the oceans scummed for hundreds of miles offshore by the tethered floating island-cities, like algae on a stagnant pond.

The only uninhabited spot on the planet today is this denuded plain in the center of which my rocket stands. A circle eighty miles in diameter — more than 5,000 square miles — of densely populated slurbs and slums had to be razed and paved with cermet for my launching pad, because even my comparatively low-powered first-stage engines will blast backward several million watts of hard X-rays, enough to kill every living

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thing within the diameter of the exhaust cone.

The teeming, seething, overflowing world I am about to leave behind reminds me of the time — Lord, so long ago, when I was the alchemist's apprentice — the time a beaker of some noxious liquid boiled over in my master's laboratory shack. It made a fog that slid over the beaker brim, put out the burner flame and oozed down to the earthen floor. I never noticed its silent spread until the cricket on the hearth strangled in the middle of a chirp. Meister Cornelius and I were able to save the ape and the conies. But by the time we had tied the agitated ape to a tree outside, the sinister fog had reached knee height indoors, and we feared to stir it up by wading through it again. So the mice all died in their cages.

Through the warped windowpanes we watched the fog, still rising. You couldn't really see its progress unless you look away for a moment and then looked in again, to note that it had swallowed some bench or stool that had been visible last time you looked. Fortunately a storm came up at sunset. From the ouside, we threw open both doors and the widow, and huddled drenched and shivering under a tree all night, while the wind and rain dispersed the killing fog. The shack was clean by dawn, and we never tried that particular experiment again.

But no such cleansing wind has ever swept Earth. For a time in the 20th century there was talk that the creeping blight of people, more people, ever more people might be ended by the Bomb — and a good deal else ended besides. But that scare seemed only to excite mankind into still more fevered increase, and the Bomb didn't fall.

That is why, now, the Janus rocket and I wait poised here at T minus 56 minutes, both of us facing upward and forward to where — if all the data, the calculations and guesses coincide with all the hopes and prayers — I will be the first man to look upon the empty, roomy, unblemished, virgin New Earth waiting to be colonized.

Why me? Because I made sure it would be me. Because I have been studying, training and preparing for this mission since before the first puny Sputnik was launched. There is not a man in the world better qualified to take Janus into interstellar space. And I am in superb physical condition. A man who has weathered six hundred and forty-six years and still looks like a professional tennis player is obviously in good shape.

But to answer fully the question "why me?" I must hark back to a time that, today, is considered as mythical as any fairy tale of

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dragons and enchantments. We are all scientists now; even the man in the street is knowledgeable and pragmatic; and it has long been customary to smile and snigger at alchemy as one of the many futile follies of the Dark Ages. We find it amusing that an alchemist trying to compound, say, the Universal Touchstone would seize on any ingredient — ("try it and see") — from newt's eyes to *usnea,* the moss that grows on a hanged felon's skull.

To which I might retort: what is this whole Project Janus but "try it and see"? The World Government, the world's scientists, they can only launch me and wait and hope that this great experiment will succeed. It is an experiment precisely as empirical, uncertain and groping-in-the-dark as any that the unscientific alchemist performed with his crucibles and alembics.

My mentor, Cornelius Agrippa, still merits a line in some of the more musty history books. But any mention of his name today would provoke only tolerant amusement: "That poor, deluded seeker after the impossible, trying with potions and philters to manipulate natural laws and forces he could not even comprehend."

To which I might also make reply. The gigantic second-stage engines far back behind my cabin's shielding are fueled with what is simplistically described in lay journals as matter/antimatter. We know the engines will work; the computers have assured us beyond any possibility of doubt or mischance. We know that when the protons from the Nuke Pile and the antiprotons from the Lee Pile collide, they will be mutually destroyed in a flash of pure energy, generating a force that will propel this ship to within a decimal point of the speed of light. But to this day no scientist — including the great Lee himself — has ever seen a particle of antimatter or really comprehended its nature. No one ever will. Are we, then, so superior to Agrippa, who knew that fire could not be made without oxygen, but never knew why?

My argument — what I am trying to make convincing here (or else the rest of my story will never be believed) — is that even an experimenter groping in the dark, be he nuclear physicist or Dark Age alchemist, *can* sometimes make a discovery that defies explanation and the laws of probability. In A.D. 2116, Lee Chang-Tsu — punching almost at random, they say — found in the computer's printout his now-famous "antimatter" equation. In A.D. 1530, Cornelius Agrippa, with equally inexplicable serendipity, concocted a flask of...well, he told me that it was a "cure for love."

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Which was just what I needed at the time. I was twenty, and living miserably in my own fairy tale: the poor and lowborn young scholar yearning after an unattainable princess in a lofty tower. Bertha was not really a princess, but she *was* living in a castle, the ward of a wealthy old widow who surrounded her with even wealthier suitors. And I, I was the despised apprentice to Zaubermeister Cornelius Agrippa, that mystery man shunned and feared by all in our little corner of the Schwartzwald.

Few in Germany at that date could read or write, far less begin to understand Cornelius' experiments. He sought after Truth, but all that the ignorant could see were the eerie lights and vapors emanating from his laboratory. They said he raised demons from Hell, and the few who still spoke to *me* implored me to leave his employ for the sake of my skin and my soul.

Bertha and I loved each other, but it was patently a doomed love. Even the gulf of superstition that set me apart from my own class was less wide and unbridgeable than the social gulf between my class and Bertha's. She and I could meet only in secret, and seldom, and on those infrequent stolen occasions our kisses were fewer than our tears of hopelessness. We must part forever, I decided, and forget each other...but how?

And then one evening Meister Cornelius set me a task. He had been working day and night over what he deemed his greatest experiment of all, and now — though the moment was critical — he could no longer keep his eyes from closing. He would snatch a few hours' sleep, he said, and I was to keep watch over the flask bubbling on the burner.

"You are vigilant, you are faithful," he murmured, a hand on my shoulder. "Look at that glass vessel. The liquid it contains is of a soft rose color. The moment it begins to change its hue, awaken me. First it will turn white and then emit golden flashes; but wait not till then; *the instant* the rose color fades, *call me.*"

He collapsed wearily onto his pallet, but roused himself a moment more to warn me: "Do not touch the vessel, my boy. Do not let a drop of the liquid touch you. It is a philter — a philter to cure love — and surely you would not want to cease to love your Bertha..." And he slept.

Need I spell out the rest? To cease to love my Bertha was exactly what I had — however reluctantly — prayed for. To end the hopelessness that tortured her as much as myself. To set her free to make a marriage befitting her station. To set myself free — of yearnings, sighs, reveries — and

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devote myself to a life, like my master's, of lonely but perhaps rewarding scholarship. And here was "a cure for love."

The rose-colored liquid became milky white, then crystal clear. I let Cornelius sleep on. From the surface of the liquid suddenly began to glance flashes of admirable beauty, more bright than those which the diamond emits when the sun's rays are on it. An odor incredibly fragrant filled the little room. The vessel seemed one globe of living radiance, lovely to the eye and most inviting to the hand. I reached out and touched it. Boiling a moment before, it was now as cool as spring water. I lifted it, tilted it and drank deeply of the most delicious liquor ever tasted by the palate of man.

Through all these years I have never forgotten the feeling that came over me. And through all these years I have never found words adequate to describe it. The best I can say is that I felt incandescent, as if I glowed with light. I even walked into a dark corner of the laboratory, to see if it would brighten at my approach. It didn't — if I *were* aglow it was with some invisible, unearthly light. All the same, despite the evidence of my eyes, I couldn't shake the impression that the shadows of everything and everybody in the world now radiated outward from me, and that I cast no shadow at all.

(I smile now. In just a few minutes that will be so. When I lift off from this deserted pad, riding a plume of flame brighter than any nuclear fireball ever seen, I *will* be the slowly rotating, pinpoint hub of a pinwheel of shadows — the shadows of every man and object on this nightside of Earth. All thanks to that remarkable liquid I drank when I was twenty — six hundred and twenty-six years ago.)

My first draught had consumed but half the liquor. Now, suddenly, I was startled — the master awakened and sat bolt upright on his pallet — the flask slipped from my hand and smashed on the floor in a glittering splash like a burst of stardust.

"Wretch!" roared Agrippa, clutching me by the throat. "You have destroyed the labor of my life!"

"But — but Zaubermeister," I gasped out. "It was but a philter to cure love..."

"*Ja,*" said he, slumping, his rage giving way to abject sadness. "A cure for love and for all things. It was the Elixir of Immortality."

Confounded and a little terrified, I made no mention that I had drunk of it. I pretended that the flask's golden flashes had frightened me; that I had attempted to remove the vessel from the flame

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and had dropped it entire. Agrippa grew calm, as a philosopher should under the heaviest trials, and kindly dismissed me to rest. I never undeceived him, never told him that I had tasted his potion; Agrippa went to his grave not knowing that I would never go to mine.

Far from being a cure for my passion for Bertha, the potion enabled me to win her. I could not believe that I had drunk anything like a magical elixir, but this I knew: from that day forward I was a new man. I was filled with courage and resolution; I felt a fierce new strength coursing through my body; and I seemed to emanate a magnetism that was irresistible to others. I marched straightaway to the castle of my darling's guardian, confronted her, demanded Bertha's hand, and the old beldam — seeming dazzled by some aura about me — willingly gave us her blessing and let me lead Bertha away to my mother's cottage.

We were wed. I left Agrippa's employ (though he and I remained friends to the end of his life) and set up in farming in a small way. My new-found power of attraction, or whatever it was that the potion had invested me with, beguiled the local Jew into financing my purchase of land — and then brought me enough customers for my produce that I soon paid him back and began buying more land on my own.. Eventually, my managers and overseers were running the farm for me, and I could return to spending most of my time at my interrupted studies. Bertha and I would, I think, have been blissful in a hovel; but by now she was the first lady in our part of Germany; she had no occasion to regret choosing me over her former wealthy suitors.

And so we lived happily ever after? I wish I could say so, but this is not a fairy tale; this is the truth. We lived happily for several years, but then —

During all this time, I still could not believe that Agrippa's philter was what he had claimed. I regarded myself as a lucky fellow to have quaffed health and joyous spirits, and perhaps long life, at my master's hands; but my good fortune ended there, I was sure; longevity was far different from immortality. Yet it was certain that I retained a wonderfully youthful look. I was laughed at for my vanity in consulting the mirror so often, but I consulted it in vain. My brow was unfurrowed; my cheeks, my eyes, my whole person continued as untarnished as in my twentieth year.

I was troubled. I looked at the faded beauty of Bertha — I seemed more like her son. By degrees our neighbors began to make similar observations, and I found at last

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that I went by the name of The Scholar Bewitched. Bertha herself grew uneasy; she became jealous and peevish. We had no children; we were all in all to each other; and though, as she grew older, her vivacious spirit became a little akin to ill-temper, and her beauty sadly diminished, I cherished her in my heart as the maiden I had idolized, the wife I had sought and won with such perfect love.

But our situation became intolerable. Bertha was fifty, I was twenty years old. I had, in very shame, adopted some of the habits of a more advanced age. I no longer mingled in the dance among the young and gay, but my heart bounded along with them while I restrained my feet. Before much longer, though, we were asked to no more dances; we were universally shunned. We were — at least I was — reported to have kept up an iniquitous acquaintance with some of my former master's supposed demon friends. Poor Bertha was pitied, but deserted. I was regarded with horror and detestation. Our servants and farm workers simply melted away.

Bertha implored me to cast off "the spell." She described how much more comely gray hairs were than my chestnut locks. She spoke of the reverence and respect due to age; how preferable to the slight regard paid to mere children — could I imagine that the despicable gifts of youth and good looks outweighed disgrace, hatred and scorn? No, she said; in the end I should be burnt as a dealer in the black art, while she, to whom I had not deigned to impart any portion of my good fortune, might be stoned as my accomplice. One time she exploded: she *demanded* that I must share my secret with her and bestow on her the same benefits I enjoyed, or she would denounce me...and then she burst into tears. She loved me, you see.

Now we felt the pinch of poverty, for none would buy the "accursed" produce of my farm. Often I was forced to journey miles and miles, to some place where I was not known, to dispose of what crops I had been able to raise single-handed. It is true, we had saved something for an evil day — and that was come.

On that day we fled our native land. We were obliged to make great financial sacrifices; it could not be helped. With our savings, we had a sum sufficient at least to maintain us while Bertha lived. And, without saying farewell to a soul, we crossed the border and crossed France, to take refuge in that remote valley of the Dordogne.

It was a cruel thing, to transport poor Bertha from her native village and the friends of her youth, to a new country, new language, new

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customs. It was immaterial to me — I think by then I knew that I should wander through many lands in the years to come — but I pitied my beloved wife. I was glad, however, to perceive that she found compensation for her misfortunes in a variety of ridiculous little pretenses.

Now far away from all telltale chroniclers, she sought to decrease the apparent disparity of our ages by a thousand feminine arts — rouge, youthful dress, assumed girlishness of manner. I could not be angry. Did not I myself wear a mask? But I grieved deeply when I remembered that this pitiable caricature was *my Bertha* — the girl who had been laughing-eyed, dark-haired, with smiles of enchanting archness and a step like a fawn...

Her jealousy never slept. Her chief occupation was to discover that, in spite of outward appearances, I too was growing old. I know that the poor darling loved me truly in her heart, but never did a woman have so tormenting a way of displaying fondness. She would discern wrinkles in my face and decrepitude in my walk, while I bounded along in youthful vigor, the youngest looking of a score of youths. I never dared address another woman. On one occasion, fancying that the belle of the village regarded me with favoring eyes, Bertha bought me a gray wig. Her constant discourse among her acquaintances was that, though I looked so young, there was ruin at work within my body; and she averred that the worst sympton about me was my apparent health. My youth was a disease, she said, and I ought at all times to be prepared, if not for a sudden and awful death, at least to awake some morning white-headed and bowed down with years.

But why dwell on all the tragic, pitiful, heartbreaking circumstances? We lived on for many years. Bertha became bedridden and paralytic; I nursed her as a mother might a child. To the last, she harped upon one string — of how long I should survive her. It has been a source of consolation to me, that to the last I performed my duty scrupulously toward her. She had been mine in youth, she was mine in age. And at the end, when I heaped the sod over her dead body, I wept to feel that I had lost all that really bound me to humanity.

Of course there have been other women since. Many other women since. How many I really don't remember, nor how many pangs at parting. But Bertha I loved, have loved, all my life. All my lives. I will love her till I

But there. The panel lights and screens wink for my attention. The Ground Control computers are-

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relinquishing some of their functions. It is time for me to

Log T+13.31 — 243 k. and going up

Dammit redline on Y65W Why? Unimportant but unexpl

Y65W redline gone but still unexp GC says forget it no sweat everything green all OK

T+1&53 cutloose

OK all the way

Why hell I log now? Still in laser comm All this data rcdng on ground Save logging till out of range

T + 7 hrs & don't know minutes. Too tired to turn from desk & check clock. I am on my way to the stars, leaving behind the brightest light ever seen, the loudest noise ever heard on the planet Earth. Leaving behind my 646 years. Leaving Bertha behind. Tired Sleep now

T plus 13 hours 32 minutes. I am awake again and in full and sole control of my big bird — of the whole of Project Janus — of all the hopes and dreams of my old world. I am outrunning Earth's laser tracking beams; their pulses come slower and farther apart, like the pulse of Bertha dying. I am alone. I have been alone all my life. But now I am more alone than any man has ever been.

I have just reread all that I wrote earlier, and I fear that my long-ago love story may sound maudlin. But I wrote it in detail for a reason: it was the first and the microcosm of — Christ! — so many such stories that I have lived through since. A thousand adored lovers like Bertha, a thousand good friends like Wernher — a thousand heart-wrenchings as I fled from their growing wonder and unease — or walked with them, their youngest pallbearer, to their graves.

I was more than three hundred years old when I found the first gray hair among my chestnut brown; I have only a sprinkling now, and I am that much older again. Am I truly immortal? I devoutly hope not, and I think not; remember that I drank only *half* of Cornelius Agrippa's elixir. But then — who shall number the years of the half of eternity?

I have yearned for death for longer than I can remember. It never came, though surely I could have tempted it if I had chosen. Just for one example, I lived through the age of the code duello; I could at any time have provoked another man to kill me; but to make a fellow-man a murderer —? No, I never really had a fellow-man, and so I have forever dodged that expedient. Other men are *not* my fellows. The inextinguishable life in my body, compared to their poor

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mayfly existence, has always placed us as far apart as I am from them right now. I could not raise a hand to provoke the meanest or the most powerful among them.

Suicide? It is no longer a sin or a crime or a confession of failure; indeed it is rather tacitly encouraged on Earth these days. But I could never take that way out, either. I could never bring myself to snuff out the most remarkable life that ever was bestowed on a mortal. Always — even at my most wretched and lonely — I kept telling myself that that elixir did not come into existence by accident, nor was it pure chance that *I* drank it. Always I kept telling myself that I was chosen — preserved — for some particular destiny.

And here it is. Project Janus: the one best, last hope of saving mankind from itself. And here I am.

Over the past few years, the robots have lasered back from interstellar space a tantalizing assortment of alternates — seven different planets orbiting seven different stars — any one of which, from the data, *might* be the New Earth. But the Old Earth, digging down to the very fuzz in its pockets, could afford to build only this one titanic Janus and point it at only one of the beckoning planets. "Try it and see."

I am headed for the fourth planet circling the star Alpha Piscis Austrinis, which is 22.6 light-years from Earth. At slightly less than the speed of light, it will take me approximately forty-seven years to get there, survey the planet and return home to report. Even in its desperation, Earth believed it could ask no more of a man than his whole remaining lifetime. And if that man returned to say that Planet 4 was sere and dead, then so would be Earth's hope, and so — very soon — would Earth be.

But this ship's fuel is theoretically inexhaustible. I have full manual and eyeball control — and I have far more than forty-seven years left to my life span. I have with me the astrogation charts to the six other, alternate New Earths that the robots have probed. (I told the Janus people I wanted to bring the charts along just to study and keep my brain exercised. They thought me a little odd — the ship is stocked with a good library of reels; a third of them the choicest pornography — but they let me bring the charts.)

You begin to comprehend? I am going to 4 Alpha Piscis Austrinis as scheduled, and I shall be overjoyed if it is the New Earth we seek. But if it isn't, I will not return home to dash mankind's hopes. There is another likely planet orbiting the star Gamma

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Cygni...and another beyond that... and another beyond that...I will try them all if I have to. I have time.

If I return home, it will be to report the discovery of the New Earth. I shall have fulfilled my long-awaited mission and be free to end this interminable, weary and burdensome life of mine. But I will not count on returning home. I have set the ship's transmitters automatically to laser back full data on every move I make, every planet I visit; the reports will take a long time to get there, but they will get there. I can only hope and believe — and I *do* believe — that one of my reports will be a happy hurrah of arrival at the most beautiful, most welcoming world in the universe. Then Earth will know, and man will come, and it will not matter much if this one poor mortal immortal meets his ultimate destiny out here among the stars. I can only

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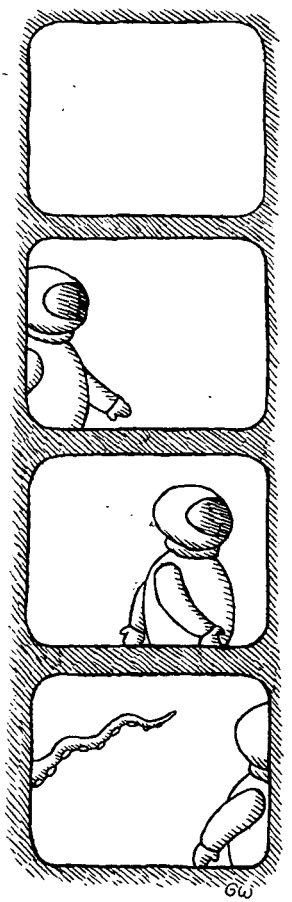
SEE THE GIANT CLAMS EAT THE FRIENDLY NATIVES!

As a matter of fact, there are no giant clams in *The Neptune Factor;* there *are* giant eels, crayfish, crabs, sea anemones, etc. "The Neptune Factor" is not to be confused with "The Poseidon Adventure," though there is a cetological similarity since we get Shelley Winters underwater in the one and Ernest Borgnine underwater in the other. TNF is a tacky submersible film about a search for a lost sealab (earthquaked over the edge of an abyss) and qualifies as fantasy only because of the giant thingies found at the bottom, but by God I paid $3.50 for it and I'm going to review it. The fish give the best performances, but since they are seen as part of some really inept process photography, they don't come off very well either. Dialogue, plot, camera work, editing and music are execrable — and what's worse, and more unforgiveable, they're dull. (This review was written *during* the film because I was bored to tears.) I suggest you keep the title in mind so as to avoid it on TV next year; at least my $3.50 won't have gone for naught.

Of much more interest this month was a celebratory, 50th anniversary retrospective of Disney films here in New York. This led to

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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some thoughts about Disney's productions over the years; though there are now several books available, I'll add my 2 cents worth. It particularly interests me that no study of the fantastic film that I've encountered touches on Disney's animated films; admittedly they are a special category and are often (wrongly) considered as only for children. Nevertheless, they are a major wellspring of fantasy in cinema, as much for unrealized potential as for accomplishment.

Shown during the retrospective were many of the short cartoons, some of the live action features, and most of the animated features. Notably missing were four that I'd like to see again: "Saludos Amigos," "The Three Caballeros," and the two review format films, "Fun and Fancy Free" and "Melody Time." I didn't see as much of what was shown as I'd have liked; I caught two programs of shorts (Academy Award winners and Silly Symphonies), "The Sword in the Stone" and "Peter Pan." I badly wanted to see the "Alice," which I remember as more Disney than Dodgeson but with at least one marvelously surrealest moment when *something* came whuffling through the tulgey wood, but the few performances were sold out immediately.

One can see the seeds of many later moments in the early shorts. Many of them were choreographed a la "Fantasia," i.e. animals, plants and inanimate objects moving to music with little or no dialogue. "The Skeleton Dance" (1932 and in black and white) is a wonderfully witty Terpsichorean exercise for four skeletons in a graveyard. "Flowers and Trees" (1932) has anthropomorphic plants involved in a little plot about a nasty old stump pursuing a lovely young tree who manipulates her leafy branches like Sally Rand's fans. "The Old Mill" (1937) is simply an impressionistic study of an old windmill and its animal inhabitants during a thunderstorm. It is really beautiful, and employs darkness with just-visible shapes and eyes, a technique that was to traumatize a generation of children a few years later in "Snow White." "The Country Cousin" (1936) has a wonderful drunk scene for a mouse that was to be repeated almost verbatin in "Dumbo."

"Who Killed Cock Robin" (1935) was a bit of a shocker to contemporary sensibilities. Jennie Wren, coming on like Mae West, was pretty funny, but the cupid who really shot Cock Robin and a blackbird suspect were portrayed as so ditsily effeminate and so shufflingly coon-like, respectively, as to make a contemporary audience squirm.

"The Sword in the Stone"

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(1963) is, of course, the first book of T. H. White's classic fantasy trilogy, "The Once and Future King." I remembered it as a mite less offensive than the usual Disney rendering of the classics, and my memory was correct. White's humor-through-anachronism was kept as a device quite successfully. And there is a moment of true pathos when Wart (the boy Arthur) is pursued in his squirrel form by an amorous female squirrel and then returns to his true human shape. The squirrel flees in utter terror and is left sobbing inconsolably in her tree. It is interesting that "Camelot" picks up the trilogy for the second and third books; the two films cover the entire work (double feature, anyone?).

"Peter Pan" (1953), on the other hand, is typical of the Disney cutsification approach. One would think it difficult to out-cute Barrie, but they certainly succeeded here. There are a few things to be said for it, though; some moments of visual beauty or visual humor, and certainly the particular point that Peter is portrayed as just what he was, a boy on the brink of adolescence, rather than the embarrassing male drag of Mary Martin (admittedly the standard casting approach for the play since its premiere).

But nowhere in the later works — say approximately post-war — can be found the darker and more frightening elements that made "Snow White," "Pinnochio," and "Bambi" more than pretty cartoons for kids. Or for that matter, any of the attempts at an esthetic that is more than just pretty as, for instance, the stags in the meadow sequence in "Bambi." And despite the pleasures of the early works and my regard for "Fantasia" as a great film, the Disney handling of "The Wind in the Willows" and "The Jungle Books" remains unforgivable, not just because of my personal distaste, but as ruination of those two wonderful books for many children that might have otherwise grown to know the originals.

Prime time dept....I'd been meaning to mention "The Mouse Factory" (NBC) for some time and this seems the appropriate place. It's a good place to catch up on many of the classic Disney shorts; unfortunately they are often cut to pieces or provided with new narrations, but one can get a flavor. As of this writing, I don't know if it has been renewed for the current season.

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Here's a back-to-basics tale of frontiersman science fiction, brought to life by Mr. Cobb with some colorful new ingredients and a fast paced narrative. About Mr. Cobb: "Born 1939 in Los Angeles, grew up in Las Vegas, entered the Army in 1957, and from there did the usual kicking around. I went to college (University of Nevada as a journalism major); I've been an ore sampler on a diamond drilling crew, an upholsterer, a bank officer, a credit manager. Now living in Reno with my wife and her son from a previous marriage."

Moonacy

by C. G. COBB

I turned off the alarm and dozed, but the bed began to gently shake me awake before the first moon rose. I tried to ignore it, but it started rocking faster and shuddering, throwing my head back and forth, and it was then that my dog licked my ear.

"Aaagh," I grunted, digging in my ear with my finger while my other hand switched off the bed. Then I opened my eyes and beheld the dog, who stood grinning and panting into my face. His own face was huge, like the rest of him. I grunted again. "Good morning, Marcus Aurelius."

He said, "Hi, boss." His voice/body language produced a buoyant lift of the head, a lighting of the eyes, a multisyllabic whine. The words I heard in my mind.

I swung out of bed and stood blinking, trying to scratch the center of my back. I yawned and asked, "Breakfast?"

"I'll just settle for your leftovers, boss; I'm porking up too much. You want steak and eggs?"

"Yeah, please. Coffee with sugar. Milk."

I showered and brushed my hair and checked my face — not quite time for depilating again — and climbed into my clothes. By that time Marcus Aurelius barked, "On the table," and his roaring voice rattled the windows.

Cheery people grind my nerves on waking, but I couldn't stay irritated at Marcus Aurelius. I couldn't have stopped him from talking, anyway. I sat down, took a long drink of milk, cut into my steak. Marcus Aurelius, watching, asked, "Say, boss, is it true that people used to eat real meat and eggs?"

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I nodded, my mouth full of steak and yellow egg yolk, and swallowed. "That was before it was possible to synthesize food from base materials. Haven't you been reading your history?"

He didn't answer but continued to stare. Intelligence just doesn't seem to remove all the behavioral trends in animals. I motioned to my plate. "You sure?"

He hesitated, shook his head. "When you're through."

While I ate I sent a few thoughts out on Dooly's band, got no answer past a couple of shifting, equine dream symbols, and broadcast a strong, firm WAKE UP, DOOLY!

Monosyllabic grunt. Image of a sway-backed nag being beaten by an evil, ugly man.

Save the histrionics, Dooly. Are you awake or not?

Awake. Yeah.

Okay. Get some chow down you and get ready to go. The first moon is up already.

Sure.

Dooly is an introvert who tries to keep his sentences down to one word. His real name is Abdulla Bolbol Amir, because he has some Arabian in him, but it was Abdul from the first, which got shortened inevitably to Dooly, and that's been the way of it ever since.

I cut breakfast short and passed the plate down to Marcus Aurelius, and while he was polishing it up, I cleaned my teeth, checked the charge on my gun, and buckled it on. I glanced out the window and saw that the first moon of Frolich had just cleared the mountains to the east.

Nights on Frolich were about twenty hours long at that particular time of year. For obvious reasons, I kept the twenty-four-hour schedule that's standard throughout the Con-Fed part of the Galaxy, which was why I was getting my gear together in the middle of the night to go to work. I work for the Mariposa Combine, by the way, in the Preliminary Ecology Team Section of their planetary development program. So do Dooly and Marcus Aurelius.

The Intermed Team had begun to arrive a few weeks before, picking their spots and raising their shelters and setting up new transfer booths. The human population of Frolich had jumped from twenty of us Prelim loners to just over two thousand specialists in natural phenomena. One of them had set up housekeeping just a couple of hundred miles away, over the mountain range to the southwest. I felt like Daniel Boone, seeing the smoke from a cabin in the next valley and thinking that things were getting too damn crowded.

But it never hurts to be sociable. I turned to the vid, checked the

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map, and punched out the grid coordinates of my new neighbor. It didn't really matter if he were in bed, I reflected as my signal bounced off one of the orbiting satellites, since if he were asleep he'd have his phone on automatic and all I'd get was a recorded message asking me to call back later. But the phone on the other end rang once and someone said, "Yes?"

My breathing turned funny. It wasn't just the fact that it was a woman's voice, since as many women as men pick the sciences as their vocation, but it was the fact of that particular voice. Try picking up the phone and calling someone, thinking it to be your own gender, and this right after breakfast and a long four hours sleep, with your gun on your hip and your dog watching, and you expecting fully to engage in a little good-natured obscenity with the guy on the other end, and winding up listening to a voice exuding youth and sex and warmth and womanness, and observe what it does to your inner ear and your respiration — you haven't seen one of the creatures for more than a standard year, remember.

"Uh, buh, ub," I stated, putting my best foot forward.

"Hello?" and her voice was breathy and burry and laced with tendrils of unseen sleepiness and stirring up a welter of thoughts having to do with rumpled clothing and long, long hair and soft, soft skin —

"Hello," I croaked, and cleared my throat. Marcus Aurelius had stopped grinning and had his head cocked to the side, watching me in puzzlement. "Yes. This is Ivan Anderson, I'm a couple of hundred miles northwest of you. I'm a Prelim and I want to, uhhh —" no, Anderson, I thought, don't tell her *that* — "uh, say hello and welcome you to Frolich."

"Oh, how very nice of you! I'm still setting things up and haven't really gotten to work yet, and the silence was getting to me, I'm afraid. My name is Gloriana Hastings, I'm in biology."

"You should be."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm happy to hear your voice," I said, truthfully. "Is something wrong with your vid?"

"Oh, no, it's perfectly all right. I hope you don't mind if I leave it off visual, but I just got up."

"I know." My hunch factor's pretty good. That's partly why I have this job.

"Would you believe you're the first Prelim I ever spoke to? I know it was silly of me, but I guess I expected some kind of mountain man wearing hides and speaking in gutturals. You have a very pleasant voice."

"Thank you very much. Your

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voice is... Listen, this is a little out of your field, but something is about to happen which I've never seen on this world. You know the three moons?"

"Yes."

"They're about to appear in the same sky together, in full brightness, and will stay that way until daylight. That's something that doesn't happen very often, because of different orbits and velocities, or one or all of them being quartered by shadows of Frolich or each other, and it's a rare thing and should be observed. The first moon just cleared on my horizon. If you're not going to be busy —"

"Yes, I can see it...it's rising now over the mountains. Oh, look, would you like to come over and watch it with me? I'll —"

"Yes." Damn it, YES!

"Oh, good, I'll make some coffee and you can tell me about Frolich. There's a lot I have to know."

"There's a lot I don't know, but you're free to pick my brain on what I've seen. It's what I'm here for. Maybe I can help you get your gear set up."

"That's nice of you. Can you give me a couple of hours?"

"Sure."

I don't remember what we said after that. I hung up and went in and cleaned my teeth again. When we left the cabin, Marcus Aurelius had gotten his grin back. He jumped up and put his front paws playfully on my chest. Since he weighs slightly more than one hundred fifty pounds, this is apt to be unsettling if you're not ready, and I was preoccupied.

"Hey! I've told you about that, Marcus Aurelius. Your manners are going to hell."

"We're going visiting, huh, boss?" He frolicked at my side, his tail waving like a furry flag.

"Yes. I want you to be on your best behavior. Act like the real dogs we saw that time at the dog show back on Earth."

"Pansies."

"Don't look down on them, Marcus Aurelius. They're the genuine article, not a miracle of modern breeding like you."

We were walking in the mild darkness toward the stable where Dooly lived, and Marcus Aurelius asked, "Hey, boss, how come you named me Marcus Aurelius?"

"Because of some silly romantic notion I had when I first saw you in the incubator. I knew you'd grow up to be big and powerful, and I liked to think you'd show some good, virtuous qualities. Noble. Thoughtful. Heroic. Cultured. Like the original Marcus Aurelius. Instead, you've turned out to be more like Ragnar Lodbrok."

"Who, boss?"

"Viking. Ninth century. Big.

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Rough. Crude. Boisterous. Had the manners of a pig."

"What was his name again?"

"Lodbrok. Means Hairy-Britches."

"No kidding! Listen, that's a great name, boss! Any chance I can change mine? Huh? Huh, boss?" And he jumped on me again just to bug me.

"Hey!"

"Heh, heh, heh," said Marcus Aurelius. His humor gets heavy-handed sometimes.

I saddled Dooly and swung aboard. "Let's go, Dooly."

"Where?"

"Southwest. Head toward the transfer booth on Jarvis Peak."

Dooly snorted. "Up the proletariat," he said. It came out as a low-pitched whicker/neigh/head-shake. We started.

Dooly is a muscular buckskin seventeen hands high. They breed bigger horses, but I'm only average height, six four, and Dooly suited me just fine. And the fact that he wasn't gabby like some horses let me do my job and observe things.

We mounted the hills toward the mountains, Dooly finding his own way, and I rode easily, trying to do my job. The moon at my left shoulder cast bulky shadows across our path. The voice of Gloriana Hastings breathed secretly in my ear, and listening to my world became difficult.

My job, and Dooly's and Marcus Aurelius', was to be here. Watch, listen, feel, observe, perceive. Everything. That, and my talent, if you choose to call it that, is why Mariposa hired me.

Some people get extremely nervous when some natural cataclysm is about to occur, like, for instance, an earthquake. I have gut reactions in advance, probably because I perceive more than I think I do, and my mind makes connections I'm sometimes not consciously aware of. There are more to hunches than just vague feelings of anticipation or discomfort.

The moon was big and pale, its light lending a witchy quality to the landscape of blue-tinged grass and foliage. The trees at this level looked like hands thrust from the ground, their white boles thick like corded wrists, their permanently wind-blown limbs like gnarly bony fingers. On my first night on Frolich, I'd reflected that the ancient kingdom of Faerie, invented by Medieval Europeans, was not a myth. Looking at the muted blue sorcery of this place, I'd known that Faerie was real. Tonight, under the witch light of the moon, I wondered what Gloriana Hastings looked like.

The moon rose as we gained the higher ground, and presently we rode among the forest of tall

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straight trees whose limbs tangled together far above and shut out the moonlight, except for narrow shafts here and there that dropped to the forest floor. I listened hard and heard the goblins.

They lived up there, being arboreal, and those tangled treetops provided a world in itself for them, where they built their nests and raised their young and formed their own societies.

They were probably the most intelligent animals native to Frolich, being this planet's answer to primates. "Goblins" was simply the name I gave them; I'd leave it to the experts to come up with something couched in the Latin. The goblins were small, light-boned, mammalian, marsupial, with prehensile hands and feet, and long tails for balancing. They had wings of bone and cartilage and leathery membranes, and could glide marvelously in quiet air; in moderately windy weather they could actually gain altitude. I'd seen them on hot days, catching updrafts and soaring like sailplanes. They weren't extroverted and fun-loving, like the famous Terran chimps, but quiet and withdrawn and serious. Did I mention that they were omnivorour? Throw something at one, he'd eat it.

The dark world above me rustled and moved. Now and then one of the goblins chattered. I looked up, studied the bottom of the goblins' world, and I saw the eyes like couplets of stars, tiny and sparklike, catching the light from Frolich's first moon. It bothered me.

It shouldn't have. I'd ridden this forest hundreds of times after dark; I'd heard the goblins; I'd seen their eyes. They were harmless.

I lowered my head and shook it. What it must be, I told myself, is hearing Gloriana Hastings' voice over the phone. The presence of a woman with a voice like that was enough to upset my balanced state of mind.Maybe, I thought, she'll be wizened and scrawny, with a face like one of those goblins.

"Fat chance," said Marcus Aurelius. "Nobody has to be ugly any more."

"I wish you'd quit listening in," I told him, irritated.

We climbed the mountain with a series of switchbacks, made the ridge, and rode west along it toward Jarvis Peak. Around and below me, the land lay dark and blue and lightless. Here on the ridge Marcus Aurelius loped like a prehistoric wolf. A small wind arose, blowing in my face, riffling through my hair and moaning, flattening the nap of Marcus Aurelius' thick coat and making it shine in the moonlight.

I was still uneasy when we reached Jarvis Peak, and it was just

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before we made the transfer booth that I pinned down the trouble. I wheeled Dooly in a slow careful circle and looked and listened hard to make sure.

"What is it?" asked Marcus Aurelius, who sensed something, too.

"Just a minute." I dismounted. "Be very quiet, you guys. Listen."

But there was nothing to hear.

Frolich abounds with nocturnal life. There are rodents and reptiles and insects and predatory birds. There is something small and vicious that isn't quite a cat, that is almost a weasel, that combines certain qualities of both. I'd ridden out on many a night, heard the small sharp sounds of death that are commonplace in nature. But tonight there was nothing to hear. I checked the skies. No kitelike birds wheeled on the night.

I turned and stared at the two of them, asking mutely for comment.

"It's like everybody took the night off," said Marcus Aurelius.

"Hunch?" chuffed Dooly.

I took a pensive breath, held it, let it out, stared about me at the darkened land one more time. "No."

The transfer booth was the size of a two-flyer garage, with the characteristic wide doors. I rode in on Dooly, and Marcus Aurelius followed us in and closed the doors. The lights came on automatically. I stepped Dooly over to one of the control panels, punched out the coordinates for the booth closest to Gloriana's, set the lapse control for a half minute, and punched the activator plate that transferred us.

Outside, Frolich's large moon still sailed the sky alone. Gloriana Hastings lived only a few minutes away, now, but this time we had to head almost due east. The wind was blowing in my face again, having changed direction. I still didn't feel right, but the discomfort shifted in character when I spotted the light in the trees ahead.

"I wish you'd calm down, boss," said Marcus Aurelius a few minutes later. "You're making *me* nervous."

"Mind your own business."

"Gee, boss." But he held his peace.

Her shelter was in the midst of a copse of trees in one of the meadows of blue grass. The light that came forth was warm and fraught with things of Earth. The night of Frolich lay soft and tenuous as I rode through it, and the small wind was cold on my face.

The shelter was angular and multileveled, with transparencies for walls here and there, and in places the roof was colored translucence that stained the night rich reds and deep greens, and her place looked festive, somehow, and made me glad to see it.

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I dismounted and starting looking for the door. Sometimes they're difficult to spot.

Dooly nudged me and mumbled, "Boss."

"I don't know how long I'll be, you guys, so —"

"Boss," said Dooly, and sidestepped to nudge me again and almost knocked me down.

"What?" I snapped. "What is it?"

Dooly looked me right in the eyes, and it was the first time I'd ever seen a horse with a silly expression on his face. He lifted one corner of his mouth while he sent his thoughts to me, and his eyes positively rolled in his head.

"Boss," he muttered, "check out the *build* on this one here. Over behind me, grabbing some chow."

I looked. Staring over the saddle on Dooly's back, I couldn't see anything except the little palomino mare which I assumed was Gloriana's, cropping delicately at the grass.

"Just *look* at that."

Dooly was practically a son to me, as he'd been with me since they'd removed him from the incubator, and so I acted like any father does under similar circumstances. I said, "Uhhh —"

"How about that, huh?"

"Uh, Dooly —"

"No blanket. No bridle. Not a stitch. Look at that *rump*."

"Look, Dooly, I want you to be on your best behavior."

"Say, boss, how about if you just slipped off my saddle and let me get comfortable?"

"I'm telling you now, Dooly," I said, my voice rising with the conviction that I wasn't being listened to, "don't you go starting anything."

"Wait a minute. You're talking about two consenting adults, here. You can't just tell us to lay off. What if she's willing?"

This was more than I'd heard from Dooly in over a year. I swung my head away from him, frustrated, and Dooly continued: "Man, oh, man..."

"Listen, Dooly. Don't give me that stuff about consenting adults. You've never seen this...uh, filly before. What are you going to do, just walk up and ask?"

"Oh, yeah? What'd *you* come riding over here for, anyway?"

"It's part of my job, Dooly. Naturally I'm a little nervous. I haven't seen a girl in a year."

"What do you think *I* been doing all this time? Listen, you give us intelligence and we lose this seasonal, mechanical stuff about sex we've had since the first horse. A mare doesn't come into her time, anymore, she's already there. We want it whenever we think about it, like you. And I been thinking a lot, lately."

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He was right, of course, and Dooly *was* a stallion. I'm no gelding, myself, for that matter. But:

"The subject is closed, Dooly. It's liable to inhibit conversation if we look out and see two horses coupling on the grass."

"If you won't look out, we won't look in."

I grabbed him by the bridle and yanked his head close and hissed right into his silly bony face: "Listen, you jug-headed vegetarian. That horse is intelligent, like you, and I won't have you jamming everything up before I even meet Gloriana, and I don't want any stories passed along to her by her mare about how my stallion came over and propositioned her while I was — just keep your hands — I mean, keep your —"

"Okay if I get some chow?" he asked coldly.

"I'll ask the lady."

"Don't bother. I'll ask." And he wheeled and cantered off, prancing and lifting his tail and arching his neck, and headed right for the palomino.

"That's not who —" and then I gave up.

We found the door on the side of the house, and it was then that I noticed the bay horse near the back, grazing sullenly at the grass under the trees. Gloriana already had a visitor. I was glancing over my shoulder at Dooly when the door slid open and I stood face to face with Gloriana Hastings.

Women usually reach five ten or eleven, but this one couldn't have topped five feet six, and might have been shorter. She was something created one-time-only, in miniature, in quiet good taste. Her build was slender but not sparse; she damn sure had enough of everything. Her hair was long and dark and tumbled past her face, which was delicate and smiling. She looked exactly like her voice.

Close your mouth, boss, thought Marcus Aurelius. I did, and put on my Boyish Grin, which had worked for me in the past. At that moment it felt like a Vacuous Leer.

"Good morning," I said to her, giving her a preview of the brilliant conversation which was to follow. "I'm Ivan Anderson. Welcome to Frolich,"

"It's good to meet you in person, Ivan," and she said it like she meant it, and when she gave me her hand, mine wrapped completely around it. "Isn't it funny how voices can deceive you? I thought you'd be a giant, at least seven feet."

"Your voice didn't deceive me at all."

She laughed. "Should I thank you?"

"Yes."

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"Thank you."

I introduced her to Marcus Aurelius, whom she complimented a bit too much, it seemed to me (but it's all true, boss, he thought in smug silence), and she led the way into the house.

Marcus Aurelius paced along behind her in his best show-dog manner, head up, ears up, tail held decorously low and slightly curved, his hind legs flexed and giving him that wolfish look that's standard with his breed. I clumped in behind them, feeling like I had hay in my hair and manure on my boots.

Her shelter was simple but far more elegant than my rough foothill cabin. The floor was sealed super-fluid with an overlay of something soft and white and furry. Pillows were scattered over it like petals of gargantuan flowers. A multiset against the wall was playing a symphony of lights against an audial background of toned silver bells and chorded natural guitar, and was the only artificial lighting in the room. The lemon light of Frolich's first moon shimmered through one clear wall, its source riding high in the blue dark of the morning. There was a man lounging among the pillows by the window, and he stood as we entered.

Gloriana paused and indicated me. "Ivan Anderson and Marcus Aurelius, I'd like you to meet Armando Robles y Arredondo —" and this small, neat, obviously cultured man gave me a small, neat smile and bowed — "and Simon Bolivar." I noticed then the ocelot.

It had been bred to panther-size and retained the vivid coloring of the original, smaller variety. It gave me an uneasy feeling as it watched me in the flicking shadows from the symphony. It might at least get up, I thought. I picked up a silent, affirmative growl from Marcus Aurelius. Armando Robles y Arredondo got my Neutral But Courteous Nod.

"Please sit down," breathed Gloriana, waving to the furry floor and pillows, "and let me get you something."

"I'll wager," said Armando Robles y Arredondo, "that he takes his coffee black and strong, with perhaps a little sugar."

"Yes," I said, speaking to the girl and smiling, "and Marcus Aurelius could use a little water." I found a couple of pillows but didn't sit down. "You seem to be a good man for hunches," I said to the small man with the cat.

"I do not rely on hunches, but on my powers of observation. You are a Prelim, obviously —" I didn't like the way he said that — "and prefer things simple, direct, even harsh, and perhaps tonight, a little sweetness added for variety." He stood short, about six two, and

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moved with suppleness and grace, like his ocelot. I didn't like either of them, I decided, as I took the coffee from Gloriana and we sat down.

Don't get me wrong about the ocelot. Generally speaking, I like the qualities found in intelligent cats. I've known cats with wit both deep and dark, whose bravery and honor matched their sophistication and verve. But intelligence fosters individualism, and this particular ocelot reminded me of his man.

"Mando came over right after you called," said Gloriana happily, "and helped me finish setting up my laboratory. We've been watching the moonrise. I think that the nights on this world are the most beautiful I've every seen."

"That's because it's a beautiful world," I told her.

"Those markings are eerie, aren't they?" she pointed at the moon. "There, near the pole — like a pair of slitted eyes."

I nodded. "It's the mountain range that causes the effect. Like an overhanging primate's brow."

"It makes you feel you're being watched," she said in a quiet voice. She was. It was difficult for me to take my eyes away from her, even when Mando cut in again.

"The prospect of staring at that moon for better than a standard year, as you have doubtless done, would make most normal men shudder, I daresay. What, if I may ask, possesses a man to become a Prelim?"

"I've never been possessed," I told him, speaking carefully. "The life style agrees with me. I enjoy being on my own. I like the feeling of being on a new world, of being one of the first men to set foot on it. When I come to a world, it's unspoiled and clean, and it gives me something that it gives to no one else who comes after me."

Gloriana was staring, and I broke off, faintly embarrassed, wishing that I hadn't let the pompous little man goad me.

"It sounds wonderful," said Gloriana, "and when you put it that way, it's like —"

"Pursuing virgins?" smirked Armando Robles y Arredondo. "Still, there must come a time to move on, to go to the next unspoiled planet. It must involve a feeling of being dispossessed, kicked out, as it were."

I sighed. "No, by that time I'm usually ready to leave."

"Have you been a Prelim long?" asked Gloriana.

"Eleven standard years."

"I should think," came Mando's oily voice, "that Prelims are full of bits and pieces of knowledge, like a tattered encyclopedia, impossible to read coherently, frustrating the efforts of those who try."

He was getting under my skin.

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"How long have you been in Intermed?"

"Six standard years. This is my second assignment."

"What's your field?"

"Parasitic symbiosis."

A host of snide remarks thundered over the horizons of my mind. I didn't voice any of them. Looking at him, lounging there in Gloriana's house on Gloriana's carpet, sipping from one of Gloriana's cups, I decided that the best riposte would be to let his answer lie out there where everyone could look at it. So that's what happened, and a puddle of silence spread in the room. The symphony of lights with bells and guitar didn't help.

I didn't like the way things were going. I'd come over to get to know Gloriana Hastings, not to engage in stupid word games with some posturing —

Pansy, thought Marcus Aurelius.

Yeah, pansy, I thought, and quit your goddamn listening in.

He didn't answer. Instead, he broke the awkward moment by getting up and pacing over to Gloriana. He loomed above her like some monstrous destroyer of innocence. Then he lay down beside her and rested his huge head in her lap.

"*Hi,* there," she laughed, and put her coffee cup down and placed her tiny white hands on his head.

What the hell are you doing? I thought at him.

This ain't half bad, boss, but you better stay where you are. I can get away with it. You can't.

Marcus Aurelius is almost twice the size of the original German shepherd. Stretched out, his body was longer than Gloriana's. He looked up at her, his brown-gold eyes twinkling, and he grinned and listed his head and let her tangle her fingers in the thick fur on his throat.

Well, knock it off, I sent to him. I can handle my own —

It looks like anybody's game right now, boss. And he was right.

"Where's your companion?" I asked the girl. "Don't you have one?"

She looked at me in a curiously gentle way. "No."

"Gloriana's companion," spoke Armando Robles y Arredondo, "died enroute as a result of failure in the stasis field. A rarity, but it doesn't help Gloriana. The memory is quite painful. They were very close." And if his words fell short of accusing me of boorishness, his tone didn't.

"I can imagine how you'd feel," and I spoke to her and ignored him. "If I were to lose Marcus Aurelius —"

"Gloriana," said Mando quiet-

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ly, "it can't help you to lavish attention on this man's dog."

"It's all right," she said, then: "*ooh* —" when Marcus Aurelius took her hand between his teeth. His jaws can develop crushing pressures of almost two hundred pounds per square inch. He very gently moved her hand aside, tucked his head beneath her arm, and snuggled against her.

"Oh," she whispered, and bent down and hugged him.

His affection was genuine — I checked. Beneath his massive coat of fur and muscle, Marcus Aurelius is a warm-hearted slob.

Armando Robles y Arredondo looked disgusted. So did his cat. Thinking with a certain smugness about the intrinsic differences between dogs and cats, I looked beyond them, through the transparent wall, and there came the second of Frolich's moons edging over the mountains.

Mando saw me looking and turned his head. The secondmoon was next in order of size, and since its orbit was smaller, it was discernibly faster. A full quarter of it had already cleared the skyline.

"Gloriana," he said, "the other moon."

She released Marcus Aurelius, patted him, and turned toward the wall. The moon was now almost halfway up.

I couldn't keep my eyes off it. The sight of it sliding into the sky was like watching a big white fingernail scraping its shocking path up a cosmic blackboard, and it affected my nerves the way you'd expect. Armando Robles y Arredondo sat up and blocked my view. I shifted to the side to better see the moon.

Sorry, boss, thought Marcus Aurelius. I tried.

"Huh?" I mumbled. I saw then what he meant. Mando had moved closer to Gloriana and covered her hand with his. He flicked his eyes back at me and smirked.

I looked from him to Gloriana to the moon and back again. Then I considered the satisfaction of stomping the smirk indelibly into his face, together with the imprint of my boot. Then I started to my feet.

Marcus Aurelius was already up. The ocelot stirred and hissed. Gloriana started. "Ivan, what — is something wrong? Are you leaving already?"

Before I could answer, Mando spoke: "I suspect that's not his motive for standing, but what does one expect from a man who wears a side arm when calling on a lady?"

He wasn't wearing one, of course. I thought briefly about asking him for satisfaction anyway, though I'm not a duelist, and he no doubt was.

Lemme handle this one, boss,

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Marcus Aurelius flashed at me. I'll tear him out a brand new —

Not now, buddy. Settle down.

Light from the two moons swelled and burst into the room, splashing the five of us, and there was no light but that, for the symphony had ended.

Don't worry about his cat, boss, 'cause he'll meow in a tenor voice after I bite off his —

That's enough, I thought sharply. Bloody thoughts like that are contagious.

Gee, boss, he grumbled silently. But he settled down.

And the wrongness was there, the wrongness that had ridden my back like a hag all the way from the forest, it was there in the room. The second moon cleared the mountains and fell upward toward zenith, and I had to get out. Gloriana or no Gloriana, I had to get out.

"Yes," I snarled, "I'm leaving." And I turned on my heel and managed to miss my untouched cup of coffee as I strode from the room. DOOLY, I shouted silently, GET OVER HERE. NOW!

The door hissed open, and I stepped through, turned to wait for Marcus Aurelius, and I was once again face to face with Gloriana Hastings.

I wished I could have read her mind, then. I couldn't read her face. But mind links between humans require a legal as well as a surgical effort, and so we had to settle for words.

"Ivan," she said quietly, "you'd probably tell me what is wrong if you wanted to; so I'll take it for granted that you don't want to and I won't ask. But..."

"But what?" I grated, impatient and spooked.

She stiffened. "Nothing." And shook her head.

Dooly's hooves sounded behind me. There was nothing stopping me from mounting and riding like hell. "Gloriana," I began, forcing myself to use a civil tone, "Gloriana, there are certain people who get extremely nervous when, uh, unpleasant things are about to happen. I've been nervous since our phone call. It's gotten worse since, and especially within the last few minutes. I don't want you to take this personally, but I've got to go. Now."

"I...don't really understand..." She shook her head again. "You know, it's very hard for me not to take it personally. Maybe it's me; I haven't quite been the same since my companion...is it because you're a Prelim?"

"Yeah," I said, putting an edge into it, like an idiot, "us Prelim loners are very odd birds. Long on violence and short on cultured repartee. That's why we're the first ones in. And the first ones out."

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The long breath she took was too ragged to be a sigh. "I know they pick you people because you're extra sensitive. But I'm sensitive enough to know that you're doing this on purpose. And I wish you wouldn't. I'm sorry you have to go. Maybe you can come back sometime."

Armando Robles y Arredondo appeared behind her. The door hissed closed. Dooly waited, silent, until I mounted, and broke immediately into a gallop without me having to tell him.

After a quarter hour we slowed to a walk. The wind still blew from the east against our backs and had gained in strength. My body rode Dooly automatically, while I sat in my mind and watched a blackness grow and grow, and clamped a mental fist about it and tried to contain it, but the pulsing force of it was strong and could not be held.

"Boss," said Marcus Aurelius, "the third moon."

The third moon came, tiny and extremely fast. It was already clear of the horizon and climbing rapidly among the stars. The blue night of Frolich seemed weird anemic daylight.

"Ohhhh," said Dooly.

"What? What is it?" I asked him, startled.

"Ohhhh," he said.

"You said that before. Are you in pain?"

"Love."

"What about it?"

"I'm in it."

"Huh?"

"Aurora."

"Ohhhh," I said.

"Ohhhh," said Dooly, and Marcus Aurelius said something in the spirit of Ragnar Hairy-Britches.

Look, Dooly —"

"Ohhhh," he whined, difficult for a horse at the best of times, but he managed, "she's beautiful. Every time I think of her —"

"Well, don't."

"I can't help it. I just want to turn her around and lift her tail and get on her and —"

"You're not in love," I told him, "you're in heat."

"What? What's the difference?" And while I was fumbling with that one, he went on at greater length: "And besides, intelligent horses don't get in heat."

"No more than intelligent men, anyway," I said.

"Hah," said Marcus Aurelius.

"Ohhhh," said Dooly.

"Ye gods," I cried, my nerves worn to tattered fibers, "is this whole world going —" I stopped.

The wind had risen considerably and was a constant buffet from the east. All three of Frolich's moons were high and pale, shedding their implacable light on the blue world. I stopped Dooly and looked back, at the faint light of

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Gloriana's in the stand of trees, at the forested mountains far beyond, and the black cloud hovering over them and growing swiftly larger —

And the blackness boiled and broke in my mind.

"All this time," I snorted, half full of triumph and half full of dread, "all this time I thought my hunches were going bad on me! All this time I thought it was Gloriana spooking me and making me act like a neurotic fool!"

"Boss," Marcus Aurelius cut in, "I hear something."

"I know you do! I know you do! I've heard it since before it started, and I've been deaf!"

My words flung away on the wind. I watched the cloud on the horizon grow, and I put everything together:

The three moons rising in full phase. The blackness in my brain, beginning with the eerie ride through the forest, silent with one exception. The absence of nocturnal animals, with one omnivorous exception. The sky, empty then, empty now, except for —

"Boss," said Marcus Aurelius, listening with his big ears to something brought him on the rising wind, "does a cloud chatter?"

"It does if it's a cloud of goblins."

We ran like hell for the transfer booth.

"They knew!" I shouted as we clattered through the doors. "All the other animals knew! Right down to the last mouse, and especially the birds! They knew enough not to come out!" I punched out the coordinates for Jarvis Peak. "But not us! Not us!" I hit the plate and we transferred.

The booth's walls were insulated, but the sound reached us, anyway.

"Hey," said Marcus Aurelius.

I jumped from Dooly's back and switched on the five screens that let us look outside, and there they were.

The booth was like a rock in a swirling surf of goblins. Front and back, left and right, they swooped on bat wings, fluttered to earth, skittered and howled and chattered, ran over the walls and roof, pounding, scratching, screaming. They leaped from the roof and were replaced by more, riding on the winds from the east, and overhead, a solid black tide of them sliding westward through the blue air between the mountains and the moons. As we watched, one came hurtling toward one of the eyes mounted in the walls, and it spread its wings and clung to the wall an instant under the plastering of the wind while its fanged little face glared maniacally into the screen and gibbered, gibbered.

"Look at that," growled Mar-

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cus Aurelius, and Dooly snorted a startled snort.

"They're insane," I said shortly. "Back on Earth in the old days they called it lunacy."

"Why?"

"The moons. Well, actually, Terra has only one moon, Luna. Hence the name. Dogs used to howl at it. There were cases of humans who were affected by it, who became deranged when the moon was in a certain cycle. Extreme instances like that were rare, but they were real. Legends grew."

"I read about werewolves," said Marcus Aurelius.

"I thought you might." I glanced at him. "How do *you* feel?"

"Boss! You gotta be kidding!"

"Just checking." I stared at the screens. "Species madness. A whole damned species. Good thing it happened now, when the Intermeds are here to observe —"

The blackness was still in my brain. There's usually a good reason for it.

"Get on the grid, you guys. Stay close to Dooly, Marcus Aurelius. We might have to use the field, and I don't want you trapped outside." I carried a portable force-field projector mounted behind the saddle. Standard equipment whenever I went anywhere. Like my gun.

I punched in the coordinates for the booth we'd come from, the one near Gloriana's. I still had a hunch, and it was gouging me in a particularly nasty way. I was on Dooly's back when we transferred. The doors opened, we galloped out, the doors closed, and the universal alarm bracelet on my wrist went *brrrr!*

"My hunch was right, damn it," I roared. "Dooly, you *GIT!*"

We got. East. Toward Gloriana's shelter. Toward the ravening horde of goblins that were following the moons on the wind.

My thoughts were swirling as we raced over the blue landscape. I hoped that she was still in the shelter. But if she were, why'd she activated the alarm? Maybe it was Mando and the cat. At that thought, something wild and uncalled-for sprang forth in my mind, until I remembered the dirty goblin teeth in the gibbering face on the screen.

Her shelter was empty. Her horse was gone.

The alarm bracelet was directional. We ran toward its increasing burring screech. Dooly was laboring. I felt his heart and lungs slugging the insides of his ribs.

Presently I switched on the field. We rode among goblins.

The goblins traveled swiftly on the wind. We were like a light in a cloud of moths. They clustered around us in a solid mass, bobbing gently on the field, screaming and salivating, gnashing their fangs,

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clawing at the invisible energy wall. We were riding against the wind, and the goblins slid away and were replaced by more.

Homicidal, I remarked with a thought.

Canicidal, came from Marcus Aurelius.

Equicidal, observed Dooly. But whatever they wanted to call it, they were right. The goblins wanted us, blood and bones.

Then we found them.

Gloriana was lying face-down underneath her horse. Aurora was also down and had positioned herself with her limbs on either side of Gloriana, protecting her somewhat, and was holding her weight off the girl. The position prohibited movement, and goblins had fastened themselves all over the animal, as it obviously couldn't reach the portable field projector behind the saddle. Blood streamed from dozens of wounds in the golden coat. Goblins fluttered about the horse's head, which tossed and whipped from side to side. As we watched, Aurora's teeth caught one of them, mangled it, threw it aside with several others who lay dead or maimed on the blue grass that ran with red.

And Armando Robles y Arredondo, mounted on his bay horse and accompanied by his ocelot, protected by the dome of his force field, rode around and around and around, a sick, white look on his face.

I couldn't speak. I thought — something bloody and incoherent — to my animals, got back something in return, and drew my gun. We swept up to the pair on the ground; I switched off the field, kept my hand on the toggle till we were beside the wounded horse and the girl, switched the field back on, and locked half a hundred goblins with us.

I wrapped my arm around my eyes and tried to stay on Dooly's back and shot one in midair and shot another off Marcus Aurelius's back, and I heard a voice that shouted: "We saw them coming and tried to run. She —"

— saw torn goblins flutter like paper, and Dooly reared, almost unseating me, and his hooves, flailing, smashed a goblin from the air, as —

"— she wasn't looking and rode under a low limb and hit her head and fell, and I couldn't get to her — those *things* —"

— engulfed us, clawing Dooly's neck and face, sinking teeth into my hand, and Marcus Aurelius crushed a goblin in his jaws, dropped it, leaped for another, but there were still many goblins —

"— all around me, turned on my field, couldn't get to her without turning off the field —"

— as I got my left hand on a

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goblin's neck and throttled it, clubbed another with the pistol, and I regressed into an earlier kind of man with an earlier kind of weapon, and my thoughts, mingling with those of Dooly and Marcus Aurelius, turned dark and grisly, we three —

"— couldn't *do* anything, couldn't *help* her, I don't have a *gun*, you're *lucky*, don't you *understand —?*"

— understood only fighting, only kicking, only smashing rending tearing crushing biting clubbing until —

"— until help came —"

— until the last goblin died.

Then came the real horror. I had to look at Gloriana.

We kicked goblin bodies aside and let Aurora roll over. Dooly stood over the palomino, nuzzled her, and whickered, whickered.

Gloriana had a sullen ugly swelling on her temple. She was unconscious, breathing shallowly. She had — I saw I was bleeding on her and moved aside, lay down beside her to look into her face without moving her — she had both eyes intact, her jugular vein was untouched, her face was still there. She was gashed and torn and bitten and bloody. She was alive. She'd be all right. The goblins still gibbered outside the field. I ignored them. It was a little harder to ignore Armando Robles y Arredondo.

The hospital arrived shortly before dawn, floated down, settled itself around us, laid Gloriana and Aurora gently away inside soft fields of clean energy, and lifted.

At dawn the goblins flew away. I presumed they'd sleep it off and wake up reasonably sane.

"Here," said Harry Mbolo, and handed me a tiny cup of something.

"What?"

"Stimulant, tranquilizer, morale booster, whatever. Drink it, okay?"

I tossed it down and looked around, saw nothing but the spotless waiting room, with its window showing Frolich's landscape moving beneath us, bright and blue in the new sunlight.

"Looking for something?" Harry asked quietly. Harry was a Prelim and had happened to be near the hospital when the alarm sounded.

"Yes," I said. "I'm looking for Armando Robles y Arredondo. And his cat."

"Take it easy," Harry said. "He's being treated for shock."

I stared. "He's being treated for shock? Do you know what he —"

"I told you to take it easy. I heard about how you went for him and forgot about the force fields and got bounced on your pistol belt. You should have known he wouldn't let you in with him."

"Where'd you hear that?"

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"He told me."

"Did he also tell you that one never wears a gun when calling on a lady? Did he tell you he didn't have guts enough to lower his field long enough to —"

"Ivan," said Harry, "you stay away from him."

"If I see him," I said, "I'll wipe him out."

"I know. That's why he's being treated for shock, even though he doesn't need it. He protested and I insisted. This is a hospital, Ivan. Don't you forget it. Later, if you want, you can exchange cards with him, register with the Board of Honor, and send your second around to see him. That's the way civilized people do it, Ivan. Remember?"

"You'll be my second?"

"If you really want it."

I shuddered in a breath. "Hell, I don't know. Can I see Gloriana?"

"I'll check and let you know." He left without another word.

"Ohhhh."

"Dooly, if you start that again, I'll bust you right in the nose."

"You get mean when you drink, boss."

"Yeah." I sat quietly for a minute or two. The animals carefully ignored me. "Sorry, Dooly."

"That's all right."

"Aurora probably thinks you're quite a stallion."

"Yeah." His big bony face, covered with bandages, moved up and down. "You, too, boss."

"What? Aurora thinks I'm —"

"Not Aurora. What's-her-name."

"Gloriana, you big dumb — how do you know?"

"While we were waiting for the hospital. Aurora and I talked to take her mind off the pain. Seems like what's-his-name suggested they go for a moonlight ride, and Gloriana told Aurora by mind link that she was doing it to get him out of the house, and that she thinks you're a pretty big stud."

"What did she say, really?"

"She said that you're right, that you are a pretty odd kind of a bird, and that you're attractive in a battered sort of way, and she half expected you to kick what's-his-name through the wall, and she was kind of disappointed when you didn't, and she wished that you hadn't left, and —"

"Ohhhh."

"It's disgusting when you do it," said Dooly.

Harry looked in and asked, "Wanna see her?"

I didn't answer. I was on my feet, forgetting my aches and pains, and if Marcus Aurelius and Dooly listened to my thoughts as I hurried out, I wasn't aware of it. Not that I cared, anyway. They were good thoughts.

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In which a terrestrial jockey finds himself on a very different mount, riding for stakes far greater than anything he had known on his earth, in his galaxy.

Voyage With Interruption

by DORIS PITKIN BUCK

For an entire moment Arc'ro stopped thinking about horsemanship, mounts, prizes, and new racecourses waiting in new galaxies. He simply stared. Where whole constellations should have glimmered, where stars and condensing gases should have spread before him, informative as a map, a shield covered the space liner's viewport, a blankness of metal, unexpected, confusing. If anything so unresponsive could have spoken, it would have cried, "No Questions Answered."

Arc'ro glanced at his chronometer. It recorded 1:30 p.m. T.T. (terran time). What in hell was going on? Where was everybody?

He was baffled, also provoked. But the ship's personnel must have some good reason for blotting out the skyscape. Anyway, who was he to question what the staff and crew might do? He ought to be damned grateful he was on the voyage at all, his passage paid by the Transgalaxy Shipping Conference, which had told him in their ponderous official way that he'd lend novelty to the trip. They also suggested that he wear his jockey costume.

He was lionized. Women even tried to snip pieces of satin from what he wore: huckleberry blue, the tint of his eyes, and clear yellow, just a little brighter than the old gold of his hair. Oh well, if a fellow won legendary American races like the Derby and the Belmont, and afterward topped that by coming in three lengths ahead of everything at the Kinshasa in Zaire, he has to take something in stride. Arc'ro blinked again at the shield, then decided to do something.

He sauntered to the ship's tape collection. He might as well put in some time absorbing information about racetrack conditions beyond the Trapezium cluster. To his surprise a heavy silken rope

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stretched in front of the cabinets.

"Sorry, sir," a robo-steward rolled up and told him softly, "today our files are off limits to passengers."

"What the —"

"I don't know, sir. New regulations. I don't understand them myself. Can I bring you —"

"No food. No drinks, thank you, if that's what you were going to offer. Just some information on the part of the heavens we're approaching."

"Easily supplied, sir. I can take you to some atlases with celestial maps if you don't mind old-fashioned info-dispensers like books. I'll accompany you right through the doorway on the left into the ship's library. Then I hope you'll find everything you want, sir."

Arc'ro had never been in a library with actual volumes on stationary shelves. The librarian shoved the heavy door open and let Arc'ro step inside. The jockey's eyes widened. The shelves were entirely empty. While he gawked, something very heavy smashed down on his head.

When he came to, fuzzily, he was in a space pod designed to hold a single person. Now it held not only Arc'ro but a humanoid with an apelike forehead. Arc'ro's suspicion that he was being disabled to prevent his riding in some race vanished, to be replaced by the hideous certainty that he'd been overpowered by space pirates. Impressions began to fit together in his mind. He'd heard and completely discounted the tales of inside jobs pulled in deep space, of slavers hijacking everyone on a passenger list. He could not tell where the attack on him — and presumably others — had taken place. The blocked-out constellations, the empty shelves, they were not coincidences. His throat grew horribly dry.

They were passing some sort of moon that by no calculation of his ought to be there. He was thankful, though, for its light. Hardly turning his head, he sneaked a glance at his captor. The thing's skin was green and blotchy, like something decaying. The head was furry and the fur had a mangy look. It smelled. He tried to move and found his wrists and ankles were bound. His skull throbbed. The humanoid, seeing Arc'ro reviving, began to pummel him. This was hard to do in the cramped pod. But eventually the man became unconscious again.

When Arc'ro came somewhat to himself, he was tied by the ankle to a short stake driven deep into the ground. He was dizzy. He was limp. For a while his captor held him up; then the pirate moved away. Arc'ro

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saw his own hands were unbound. He felt lumps on his body which were very sore. The green rays of a sun less warm than Sol lighted a marketplace.

He stared. A half-human thing looked him over. Instead of lids, teeth rimmed its eyes. It snapped them viciously. The pirate returned, brandished a stick, and the thing ran on.

The air smelled of beasts. Sometimes long tentacles slithered toward the post where Arc'ro was tied. Once such a tentacle fastened about his ankle. The pirate pulled it off. For a long while Arc'ro felt the cold slime it left behind. His skin crawled.

A crate of birds, all unfamiliar, was set down near him. He managed to slide back the fastenings of a wicker door, and one flew free. The owner soon appeared, and he could do no more. But he found fury shaking him. He found himself roaring, "Freedom! Freedom! *Give me back my freedom!*" His words were lost among the shouts, the roars, the high nonhuman squeals and what sounded like the curses of that market.

He breathed the air of a planet different from Earth, somehow drier. It rasped in his throat. Coughs shook him. Even so, he looked for captured members of the spaceship. He saw none.

Two men, middle-aged, not unlike Arc'ro though slimmer and taller, shouldered their way toward the young man. The pirate rushed them, gesturing and pointing at Arc'ro. After that he pulled Arc'ro's stake out of the ground and, evidently bent on making a sale, followed the slim men about.

Now and then the pirate would stretch Arc'ro's arm out and indicate his muscles. The men exchanged glances. One of them inquired in English, with a heavy accent, "Strong?" Figuring that any master would be better than the ape-faced pirate, Arc'ro nodded.

The man gestured to someone, evidently a servant. From a bag about his neck the servant produced reins and a bit. They could be nothing else. But the bit was too tiny to fit even the mouth of a colt. Arc'ro had no time to puzzle. The tall man held the bit tightly in his fingers, tossed the reins to Arc'ro and indicated that the young man was to pull as hard as he could.

The feel of reins in his hands gave the jockey confidence. He was unconscious of the way he tossed his head, his hair flying back. But afterward he could see he had made some sort of impression, quite possibly good.

He was weighed in something like an old-fashioned grocer's scale,

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with the pirate producing hewn stones to balance in a separate pan. The slender man paid closest attention, then shrugged and walked off. The pirate howled. Clutching Arc'ro by the hair, he rushed after them. Arc'ro, furious and in pain, turned on the pirate and knocked him to the ground with one blow. To his surprise this evidently pleased the men. They began to feel his calves, his biceps, the cords in his neck, the flatness of his belly, the roundness of his buttocks, even the length of his fingers. The pirate was on his feet, measuring Arc'ro with his hands, evidently showing off all his points, even the young man's good teeth, although the strangers showed no interest in his mouth. Then all three talked with many gestures till the sun was much higher in the sky.

Abruptly the talk stopped. Some kind of money that looked like magnified snowflakes changed hands. After that the men's servants tied Arc'ro's hands tightly behind his back. They prodded him, not too hard, to make him walk. If he chose the wrong direction, they used whips — but lightly.

Finally they reached a paved square. Starships of all sizes and shapes floated above the ground, defying gravity, each tethered to its mast. Metal ladders led up to the ship's airlocks. A specially forceful prod sent Arc'ro over to a ladder. He climbed it promptly. No more prods. He must be doing the right thing.

At the top he was shoved into a pitch-black room. His hands were untied. Though he could see nothing, he heard noises. Probably servants bustling about. He told himself he needed to know all he could about these aliens. It would be useful if he got any chance to escape. Evidently they could see in the dark. Eyes like cats? Blackness was a bandage over his own eyes.

He was pushed across the room and thrown on a mattress. It felt comfortable. In spite of himself he slept.

He woke to assorted stiffnesses. Every bruise ached. Even so, he pushed out an exploratory hand. He now lay on cushions, not a mattress. They must have moved him while he slept. He lay very still, very tired, waiting for morning.

Through the dark, a whiff of perfume reached him, the most delicate of odors, hinting of all the flowers of spring. Then the softest of nighttime whispers. "Do you know why you are here, man from a far galaxy?" English again, with an accent.

"No." Then, "How did you know I came from far away?"

"Grapevine. Scuttlebutt. Those are the right words in your tongue?"

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"Perfect words."

"May I tell you that you are beautiful? Of course in an exotic way. You have light hair. Is it real?"

"Certainly. I suppose you are seeing in the dark."

"Can't you?"

"No."

She said very slowly, "It will not make too much difference, as the ordeals take place in daylight." There were tears in her voice. In a moment she was sobbing.

He wanted to ask a score of questions: Where was he? Why? Who was she? The ordeals, what were they? Arc'ro waited, stroking her as if she were some new and skittish horse, till the sobs subsided. Then he found he was in a land called Vienta, which meant Place by a Huge Sea. The girl added, and her tears started to come back, "You are in prison because you are shortly to die, unless for a little while you can keep yourself alive. That is also my fate." This time he kissed her.

"Again — grapevine. You pleased my father because of your know-how with the reins. Are you what they call a horseman? What did you ride?"

He couldn't help laughing. "Horses, of course."

"Here we ride insects. Gheriahs."

In the darkness she took his hand and patted it. "We are among the most civilized races in any galaxy. Remember this when your turn comes. No one is *trying* to hurt you."

"Thanks." Arc'ro spoke dryly.

They talked till morning. In the early light he saw her skin smooth as a petal. Her frightened way of nestling against him was touching. If she found him exotic, he thought the same about her. She was surely the most beautiful creature an Earthman had ever seen, slender as the reeds around cattails but rounded softly. Her head was small and delicate, and when she moved she could do so with the grace of some wild creature on a veldt or in a jungle. Even normal domestic Earth felines looked gawky and overweighted beside her.

But her tremendous charm, Arc'ro decided, lay in her eyes. He had often heard of beauties with violet eyes, but true violet — On Earth that was goat feathers. Her hair fell about her in great masses of purple, the only color completely appropriate. But he wished all this pulchritude were filled with more spirit.

Then he started to stroke the satin-sleek purple that lay over her shoulders and fell to her waist. As for her personal bravery or lack of it, at the moment he couldn't have cared less.

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Later he said, "Tell me about the mounts. I know something about riding. You probably know everything about gheriahs. We're both prisoners. Let's help each other."

"Gheriahs exist only in Vienta."

"Why?"

"On no other world has anyone the skill to do the generations of interbreeding that produce them. The giant needle-flies of our marshes do not mate with dancing honeybees. Though the azure needle-flies are what you call promiscuous, they fear the honeybees' sting."

He nodded. That seemed plausible.

"Our geneticists work on their larval states."

His brows went up.

"Larvae are as primitive as the fetus in the womb. At that point the fly and the bee could have become almost anything. The fly becomes three quarters fluid, but even so its rhythms persist. By putting genitals against genitals we in Vienta achieve what nature never did. Alas, you will see. For you will ride the hybrid gheriah."

He hung on her explanations. She warned, "Beware particularly of the bee sting and the feet. They turn most flexibly."

"Tell me why you are so frightened that you cry."

"We shall be made to ride these gauzy-wings long before they have been — do you say clipped, trimmed?"

He looked a question with his eyes.

"These hybrids, they are more high-strung than either bee parent or blue dragon. To learn to bear a rider, to learn to skim above the ground on wings that have been cut, this is more than they can take at once. Their first flights after being mounted are dangerous, for they have their full wingspread. Their riders are reckoned as. as expendable."

Her talk did not have the effect she expected. "A mount with wings!" Arc'ro breathed almost reverently.

They exchanged names. He learned she was Natana. She found he was called Arc'ro after a fabulous personality who could spur a horse to any effort and who won race upon race on Earth. Such an exchange in Vienta constituted a formal betrothal.

One morning a scream from outside seemed to split the very air. Natana sat bolt-upright on the colored pillows of their bed. He ran to comfort her. But even while she clung, he told her he must see who cried out, and why.

"It is a child, Arc'ro, forced to take his first ride on a gheriah. He

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will die. I can foretell from the sound of his cry."

"Courage, Natana!"

"Never look. It may bring our deaths nearer."

He tossed back his flaming hair. "I must go to the window. I can perhaps gather useful knowledge for our own flight."

Her arms that were round him, dropped. Through the barred window he saw a pony-sized mount half hidden by tree boughs. Its enormous ribbed wings stretched a man's length on either side. Its head, shiny black like an ant's, was pointed. Enormous eyes were cut jewels. The slender hind part of its body flashed blue where sunlight touched it.

The gheriah shifted on its six puny legs. Only the wings really counted. They quivered now with a yearning for the high air. A tremble went through Arc'ro, partly sympathetic terror for the youngster, partly a thrill over possibilities that lay before a gheriah's rider.

"If only such vermin were not rare." Natana bit off the words with more fury than Arc'ro had suspected in her. "My father — a curse on him, thinks them more valuable than people, especially light people like us. Though you are a man, as I well know, your build is small and boylike." She had followed him but would not look out.

Arc'ro was all eyes for three things — the mount, the child, and a tall slim man evidently of Natana's race, who held the gheriah's reins so tightly that he could pull the insect head this way and that. Arc'ro muttered, "That groom is frightening the insect. Natana, when we ride, we must hold with our knees and let the reins fall free, at first anyway."

She clutched his arm. "A nervous insect may die from shock. Its reactions are still" — she licked her dry lips with the tip of her tongue — "a subject for research." Fascinating beasts, Arc'ro thought. They may sulk, be jealous of a rider on their mate, jealous of each other's achievements. Even as he wondered, he turned Natana's head away, so she could not see the panicking child.

Arc'ro watched every motion. Natana said, "You have some plan. I can see it from your face." If she hoped he would tell her, she was disappointed.

The saddling and bridling of the mount took a long, long while. The body of the insect, even its fur, was rubbed with some adhesive ointment. Arc'ro saw the groom's fingers stick. From the child, whose tension mounted, came scream on scream. When he had been forced astride the rail-thin abdomen of the mount, he wailed. Then he was shooting past the window bars, a

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blue flash, light on steel. He caught at the cobwebby reins and the black polished head turned and tried to snap. Frantic, the small rider grabbed the bristly fur of the thorax. The insect wheeled. It rose in dizzier and dizzier circles around a pine. When the insect reached the summit, the boy looked down, his mouth open, an O of pure terror, pure silence. Arc'ro watched the metallic body curve and hump against the sky, smaller and smaller as the mount, itself in an agony of fright, flew toward faraway clouds. When at last the clutching child slid and fell, the mount had gone so far, Arc'ro could not see the blood-spattered remains on the ground.

It was day again. Arc'ro and Natana had talked, sometimes nights, sometimes mornings and evenings. The middle hours of the day Arc'ro spent at the window, hoping to gather information as the tall grooms led the gheriahs hither and yon in the sun. He learned when they molted and other curious matters, also what combinations of food were used to lure them back when riders fell, as the child had. Even with some luck they always fell. Finally.

In their conversations Natana learned what was in Arc'ro's mind. He could see that it increased her dread and brought on depression. He wished he did not have to wheedle information out of her.

"Think, Natana dearest. Tell Arc'ro anything you can remember. It may be a key piece of information." He kissed her, grudging the time it took.

"I do what you ask me, Arc'ro, because of love. But all is useless. We are the doomed."

He only said, "We shall escape from some trading post. There are intergalactic rewards for locating lost people like me. What's a gheriah for if not to be ridden to freedom? Now fill me in about posts."

"We have few."

"Why?"

"Trade and the possessions involved are beneath a gentleman's notice."

"But there are *some?*" He accented the last word.

"At least one. I saw it as a child."

"Where?"

"On a headland to the north. Very far away."

He digested that. Then he thought of the insects' wings, delicate as gauze but stiff as a sheet of metal. He wished he could calculate a gheriah's range.

"What else do you remember about that post? Did they talk with ships in space? Perhaps as a little girl you wondered."

She shook her head. "I only

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remember my father traded my mother's rainbow-striped pearls for medicine. She was sick."

If they traded in jewels, he reasoned, either they could talk through deep space, or vessels came directly to them. Possibilities were less than grim. "When we're mounted, we ride there." He hoped his excitement would do something for her.

"Through my body I feel our people's death vibrations. I have given up hope."

"Pretty fool!" He tried to make it sound as if it were a tender joke between them. He wanted to tell her he could be even more ardent if her courage matched her loveliness. He bustled about and heaped their simple furniture and cushions into a fairly good suggestion of a mount. He picked her up and set her on it.

"Now I'll show you again how to clamp with your knees. The word from now on, darling, is — and I've said it before — is *courage.*"

Soon after the next dawn, two guards arrived and ushered them to the main prison door. A contrast to the way Arc'ro had been shoved about since his capture! Then he recalled that Natana was a gentleman's daughter even if an unwanted one, an excess beyond the family birth quota, an expendable. Ancestry apparently made a difference in Vienta.

For a moment they stood blinking in the open air. Then Arc'ro reached for Natana's hand and pressed it. His was warm and against it her fingers felt lax and chilly. Recklessly he raised that hand to his lips, kissing it. Perhaps, just perhaps the idea of his love would be steadying.

Then he concentrated on the tethered gheriahs standing like creatures that might never waken. As he watched, the sun came up golden as the star that warmed distant Earth. The insects stirred. As the air warmed, they fanned their wings till the whole swarm stood in a haze of shimmer. They cavorted on their tiny feet, straining at the tethers. Light flashed from their sky-bright bodies. They stood in wild glory.

As Arc'ro watched the grooms preparing their insects, and also preparing the mash that would lure them back if riders lost them, the jockey's eyes were sternly practical. He looked the gheriahs over, then stopped. He'd picked out a small creature that stood out from the seething blue mass. The little one might not — hopefully — fly as high as the others. Its wingspread was, by gheriah standards, inadequate.

"Natana," Arc'ro's voice was low and he spoke in Earth tongue, "when they come for us, run before me."

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"Yes, Arc'ro." He saw her submissive, feminine.

"Get astride that one before they stop you." He gestured. He had no time to say *good luck.* She fled over the ground, more purposeful than he knew she could be. Almost in one bound she reached the most massive of the insects, a creature Acr'ro had wondered if he might not ride himself.

The grooms stared at Natana and the mount she chose from the brilliant herd-swarm. She paid no attention to the buzzing. The insect beside which she stood let out a sharp rattling noise. It balanced on its ridiculously small prongs, really meant for use in the wild. In spite of their diminutive size, they could stab like stilettos.

A groom, moving out of prong range with care, held the gheriah against a tree trunk. Its prongs by instinct sank into the porous bark. It rested upright and flat against the bark. A second groom held Natana's body against its back. Then with a deft twitch the man loosened the insect's feet. The sky-bright body went naturally into flight position. Natana was airborne.

A pair of grooms hustled Arc'ro forward. Several men gathered behind to cut off his escape if he turned to run. *Run! He run!* flashed through his mind. He was furious. With one leap he seated himself on the nearest insect. Not till he was skimming forward did he realize he was on the creature he had picked for Natana. He was conscious of a shrill, angered buzz.

As Arc'ro rose and rose, he looked for Natana. But his mount veered madly and nearly threw him off. It possessed surprising stamina. In an instant he shot straight up, like an arrow aimed at the sun.

Then his mount flung itself forward, turned at a sharp angle, later at another angle in a different direction. Height seemed to inspire the gauzy wings to yet trickier flying. Arc'ro looked round. The speck far above and beyond must be Natana on her huge mount.

Solid ground fell back, farther and farther. People and roads grew minute. Wind lifted Arc'ro's hair. The world spun. Even with the adhesive ointment, he slipped, then hunched forward. The fur was temptingly near, easy to grab. By a tremendous effort, he kept from grasping it. He had a hunch. But he felt his legs dangling on each side and knew they interfered with the wings while his mount zigzaged toward the zenith.

Suddenly the gheriah folded its wings against its sides. Man and mount plummeted. Arc'ro's heart seemed to beat in his throat. His mount veered yet again, this time beginning to rise on a slow incline.

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Arc'ro tucked his feet under him, out of the way of the wings. Everything seemed unstable, unfamiliar. He was not riding any kind of insect Pegasus. He was simply crouched on a fantastic hybrid with earth unbelievably far below. One last chance remained. He gathered the reins which he had hardly been using and pulled.

Clouds came dizzily nearer. Natana was out of sight. Wisps of fog blew coldly into his face. They could have been wool over eyes, nose, and mouth. Then he was out in bright sun again.

But this was small comfort as winds snatched at his breath. His insides churned. His heart missed beats.

Daringly he looked down. Landscape below had become a map. Not far to the right he glimpsed a seashore. This was where he wanted to be. On a point of land he made out a fortresslike building. Beside it were two masts for interstellar mooring of traders. They must be huge to show at all. Certainly this was Natana's trading post. His little gheriah had made it. But how get down?

He was almost above the post, his destination. Then maddeningly the creature headed out to sea.

He had used the reins once, tentatively. Now he yanked. The creature snapped angry jaws but turned inland.

The insect circled the point. It made no effort to descend.

Arc'ro on a wild chance threw his woven reins over the beast's head. Would it, blinded for the moment, seek the ground? No go. Wind tossed the reins back at Arc'ro.

He pulled them off. Tried again. A second failure. The third time an eddying air current whirled them over the gheriah's multiple-lensed eyes. Suddenly Arc'ro was falling — and falling. He remembered the child.

But some sixth sense, like a bat's sonar, told the gheriah when ground was near. The slowing affected even Arc'ro's eardrums. He wondered if Natana, far out of sight, was still on her mount, if she was perhaps feeling what he did.

Then the gheriah touched the ground. The adhesive ointment had evaporated. Arc'ro tumbled off its back. From far above came a zinging. Natana's gheriah, copying the smaller one, flew down. Soon the formidably huge mount settled on the ground. It folded its wings back and, obviously, slept.

"A kiss!" They said it together. In that embrace Arc'ro realized Natana had once and for all ceased to tremble, ceased to weep. They sank onto a bed of some clovery vegetation and Arc'ro made love as he had never made it before.

Beside them the small gheriah,

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unrelaxed, lay buzzing. Its wings flickered uneasily. Sometimes it half rose on its deadly feet, then settled again. Arc'ro glanced toward it for a fraction of a second, but his pride in Natana submerged everything.

She told him, "I feared for you. I chose the biggest mount lest you ride it and fall. The flight was my love journey, Arc'ro, for your sake."

He hardly looked at her, for fear she might read the thoughts he had had. This was the girl he had dared to despise.

A zinging, so loud now it seemed to sound in his brain, broke into his thoughts. He sensed jealousy, a fury of jealousy rising and rising. He thought of the drive that makes one horse outdistance the field. He guessed the small gheriah seethed in rage at being outflown. It would have attacked its larger rival, fast asleep, with feet, sting, mandibles, but did not quite dare. Instead it noised its frustration.

A crisis loomed. Arc'ro moved quickly away from the smaller insect to waken the larger to its possible danger. He placed his hand on its fur. In a second he realized this had some meaning he could not fathom. His own gheriah exploded in murderous fury. Perhaps it had craved some accolade, some human recognition. It sprang to Natana and with one terrible movement drove its prongs into her eyes. They sank deep, reaching the brain.

Arc'ro did not need to kill it. Like a bee that can only sting once, it had wrecked itself as it penetrated the skull and lay dead on its victim.

Natana now would never know what doubts Arc'ro had. But he felt cheap, so cheap the thought of mounting anything, anywhere, suddenly grew repugnant. He saw without interest how the traders would undoubtedly get a "finders' reward" for locating him and how they'd overwhelm him with gossip, if they had it, about the pirates, the ship, and the crew. He'd be speeded to his destination.

It couldn't matter less. The only forever significant part of his voyage was the interruption.

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ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

THE FIGURE OF THE FARTHEST

I sometimes despair of people ever getting anything right. From personal experience I have grown doubtful about trusting even the best histories and biographies. They may be right in the grand sweep, but it doesn't seem possible to get the little details as they really were.

For instance, I do nothing but talk about myself in almost everything I write, so that you would think there would be some details about my personal life that would be well-known to anyone who is interested in me and in my writing. Well, not so!

I just received a copy of the April 29, 1973 issue of the *Silhouette Magazine* published by the Colorado Springs *Sun*. In it, there is an article on science fiction that includes a (telephone) interview with me. Aside from a few typographical errors, it is a very nice article, and I am very pleased with it, except for one line.

The article quotes a Mr. Clayton Balch who, it says, teaches two science fiction courses at El Paso Community College. Mr. Balch talks, in part, about the drug culture and its influence on science fiction. Apparently he thinks that writers need some sort of artificial

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stimulation and simply adopt whatever variety is handy in their time. The article quotes Mr. Balch as saying about the drug culture, "A lot of the younger writers grew up with it, and in the same way Asimov is drinking Scotch, younger writers are using drugs."

Well, damn it, Asimov does not use drugs and is NOT drinking Scotch either, and never did. Asimov is a teetotaler and has said so in print at least fifty times and has demonstrated it in public at least a million times. And yet, in the future (if there is one), biographers, combing every last bit of mention about me, will come across this item and solemnly record that scotch was my favorite drink. (Actually, I do like a little sip of a sweet wine like Manischewitz Concord Grape, or Cherry Heering, or even Bristol Cream Sherry — but even a little sip gets me high, so it's not really a good idea to try.)

If a simple little thing like my drinking habits can't be straightened out, it's no wonder that more subtle difficulties offer a great deal of trouble. For instance, although the situation has been explained in a million astronomy books, and in several of my own articles, I am continually bombarded with letters from people who are indignant at the fact that galaxies are receding from us at a rate proportional to their distance from us. What is so special about *us?* they insistently ask.

In the past I have explained that this recession in proportion to distance (Hubble's Law) can be accounted for by the expansion of the Universe, but I have never really explained in detail. Now I will, because I've thought of a way of doing so that I've never seen anyone else try.

But I won't get to that right away. I will sneak up on it in my usual oblique fashion by making the article deal, first, with the successive enlargements of man's picture of the Universe.

To begin with, men only knew the size of that portion of the Universe with which they made direct contact, and this, generally, wasn't much. Traders and generals, however, were bound to travel great distances as the ancient empires grew in size.

In 500 B.C., when the Persian Empire stretched from India to Egypt over an extreme width of 3000 miles, Hecataeus of Miletus, the first scientific geographer among the Greeks, estimated the land surface of the Earth (which he considered to be flat) to be a circular slab about 5,000 miles in diameter. This, then, is our first figure for the longest straight line that was more or less accurately known.

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1) 500 B.C. - 5,000 miles

By 350 B.C., the Greek philosophers were quite certain that the Earth was a sphere and about 225 B.C., Eratosthenes of Cyrene, noting that Sunlight hit different portions of Earth's surface at different angles at the same time, used the fact to calculate the size of that sphere. He worked it out correctly, making the Earth's diameter 8000 miles, and this became the longest known straight line.

2) 225 B.C. - 8,000 miles

But the Earth's diameter could be no final maximum, since beyond the Earth lay the heavenly bodies. About 150 B.C., Hipparchus of Nicaea, the greatest of all Greek astronomers, calculated the distance of the Moon by valid trigonometric methods and announced that distance to be equal to thirty times the diameter of the Earth. Accepting Eratosthenes' figure for that diameter, we get the distance of the Moon to be about 240,000 miles, which is correct. If we imagine a sphere centered on the Earth and large enough to contain the Moon's orbit, its diameter is 480,000 miles, and that becomes the maximum straight line accurately measured.

3) 150 B.C. - 480,000 miles

And the other heavenly bodies? Between Hecataeus and Hipparchus, the known size of the Universe had increased 96-fold. It had doubled in measured size every fifty years on the average. Could this not have continued? At that rate, the distance to the Sun could have been determined about 250 A.D.

Not so, alas. After Hipparchus there came an 18-century dead halt. To use trigonometric methods for determining the distance of objects farther than the Moon required a telescope, alas, and that was not invented until 1608.

In 1609, Kepler first worked out the model of the Solar system, but it was not until 1671 that the first reasonably accurate parallax of a planet (Mars) was made, telescopically, by the Italian-French astronomer, Giovanni Domenico Cassini.

Using that parallax and Kepler's model, Cassini worked out the distances of the various bodies of the Solar system. His figures were about 6 percent low by contemporary standards, but I'll ignore such first-time inaccuracies in measurements made by valid methods and use the correct figures. Thus, Saturn, which was the farthest planet known in Cassini's time, is 886,000,000 miles from the Sun. If we imagine a sphere centered on the Sun and large enough to include Saturn's orbit, its diameter would be the new longest accurately-measured length.

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4) 1671 - 1,800,000,000 miles

This was nearly four thousand times the length of greatest distance accurately known to the ancients, and it shows the power of the telescope.

It did not remain a record long, however. In 1704, the English astronomer Edmund Halley worked out the orbit of Halley's Comet, and it seemed to him that it receded to a distance of 3,000,000,000 miles from the Sun before returning. On the basis of his calculations he predicted the return of the comet and its return in 1758 (the year he had predicted) proved him right. The diameter of a sphere centered on the Sun and including the orbit of Halley's comet was the new record.

5) 1704 - 6,000,000,000 miles

However, all the astronomers working in the first two centuries of the telescopic era knew that measuring the distances within the Solar system would in no way tell them the size of the Universe. Outside the Solar system were the stars.

Astronomers worked hard attempting to determine the distance of the stars by measuring their extremely small parallaxes and, in the 1830's, three astronomers succeeded, almost simultaneously.

The German astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel announced the distance of the star 61 Cygni in 1838. The Scottish astronomer Thomas Henderson announced the distance of Alpha Centauri in 1839, and the German-Russian astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm von Struve announced the distance of Vega in 1840.

Of these, Vega was the most distant, being about 160,000,000,000,000 miles from here. These are too many zeroes to handle conveniently. By the 1830's, some fairly good estimates already existed for the speed of light, so that it was possible to use the "light-year" as a unit of distance; that is, the distance that light would travel in one year. This comes out to be about 5,880,000,000,000 miles, so that Vega is about 27 light-years distant. If we take a sphere, then, which is centered on the Sun and is large enough to contain Vega, its diameter would be the new record distance.

6) 1840 - 320,000,000,000,000 miles, or 54 light-years

This was an enormous 50,000-fold increase over Solar system distances, but it could be no record, for beyond Vega lay uncounted other and more distant stars. As early as 1784, the German-English astronomer William Herschel had counted the stars in different directions to see if they extended outward symmetrically. They didn't, and Herschel was the first to suggest that the system of stars existed as a flattened lens-shaped object which we now call the Galaxy.

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Herschel tried to estimate the size of the Galaxy, but could produce only a very hazy guess. In 1906, however, a Dutch astronomer, Jacobus Cornelis Kapteyn, knowing the distance to the nearer stars and having at his disposal huge star maps and the new technique of photography, estimated that the long-diameter of the Galaxy was 55,000 light-years.

7) 1906-55,000 light-years

This represented a thousand-fold increase over the period of the first discovery of stellar distances, but it was not yet enough. By 1920, the American astronomer Harlow Shapley, making use of the period of Cepheid variables as a new way of determining distances, showed that the Galaxy was much larger than Kapteyn had thought. (The figure, using Shapley's methods, is now thought to be 100,000 light-years.) In addition, Shapley could show that the Magellanic Clouds were systems of stars lying just outside the Milky Way and were up to 165,000 light-years from us. A sphere centered on the Sun, and large enough to include the Magellanic Clouds, would have a diameter that would set a new record of length.

8) 1920 - 330,000 light-years

This was a six-fold increase over Kapteyn's figure. Did it represent, at last, the entire Universe? There were many astronomers, even as late as 1920, who suspected that the Galaxy and the Magellanic Clouds were all there was to the Universe and that beyond them lay nothing.

There was, however, considerable doubt about the Andromeda nebula, a cloudy patch of whiteness which some thought to lie far outside the Galaxy and, indeed, to be another galaxy as large as our own. The matter was not finally settled until 1923, when the American astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble made out individual stars in the outskirts of the nebula and was able to determine its distance. He showed that it was far outside the Galaxy and was certainly a galaxy in its own right. Twenty years later, the method he used was modified, and the distance of the Andromeda galaxy turned out to be four times as far as Hubble had first thought.

If we imagine a sphere centered on the Sun and including the Andromeda galaxy (using the distance-figure of 2,700,000 light-years now accepted), we have the diameter of that sphere as the new record.

9) 1923 - 5,400,000 light-years

This 16-fold increase over Shapley's figure, however, brought a new humility in its train, for once again it was clear that the new record wasn't much of a record. Once the Andromeda was recognized as a galaxy, it was at once realized that millions of other and dimmer patches of luminous fog must also be galaxies and that all of them were farther than the Andromeda galaxy was.

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Through the 1920s and 1930s, the distances of dimmer and dimmer galaxies were determined by studying the characteristics of their spectra. By 1940, men like the American astronomer Milton La Salle Humason had found galaxies that were as far distant as 200,000,000 light-years. A sphere centered on the Sun and enclosing them would supply a diameter for a new record.

10) 1940 - 400,000,000 light-years

This seventy-five-fold increase over the distance of the Andromeda galaxy did not represent the full width of the Universe, one could still be sure, but at the extreme distances being measured, the galaxies had grown so dim that it was almost impossible to work with them.

But then, in 1963, the Dutch-American astronomer discovered the quasars, objects much brighter than galaxies and with spectral properties indicating them to be much farther than even the farthest known galaxy. Even the nearest quasar was of the order of a billion light-years away. A sphere centered on the Sun and large enough to include the nearest quasar would be two billion light-years in diameter at least.

11) 1963-2,000,000,000 light-years

This five-fold increase was not the end, for surely there would be more distant quasars. In 1973, in fact, the distance to one of them, known as OH471, was measured as twelve billion light-years. A sphere that centered on the Sun and included OH471 would represent a new record.

12) 1973 - 24,000,000,000 light-years

This is a further twelve-fold increase.

In twelve stages then, man's appreciation of the size of the Universe had risen from 5,000 miles to 24,000,000,000 light-years, an increase of nearly 30,000,000,000,000,000,000-fold in 2,500 years. This represents a doubling of the known size of the Universe every 32 years, on the average.

Of course, most of the increase came since telescopic times. Since 1671, the known size of the Universe has increased 80,000,000,000,000 times in 302 years. This represents a doubling of the known size of the Universe over that period of time every 6.5 years on the average.

And we seem to be keeping it up. In the last 10 years we have increased the known size of the Universe twelve-fold, an amount rather above the average. So if we continue expanding the known size of the Universe at the rate we have been for the last three centuries, then by 2010 A.D. we ought to have driven the boundaries of the Universe outward and established the diameter of the known sphere in excess of the trillion-light-year mark.

Unfortunately, we won't.

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After all the doubling and redoubling and re-redoubling, seemingly without end, astronomers have, indeed, reached the end; and as luck would have it, they reached that end in your life time and mine, in the good old year of 1973.

How is that possible? Well, here goes, for I am now ready to talk about the expanding Universe and the receding galaxies.

In order to simplify the matter of the expanding Universe, why not reduce three dimensions to one. Everything remains valid, and it is easier to visualize the argument in one dimension.

Let's begin by considering a string of lighted objects (micro-Suns if you like) stretching out in a straight line indefinitely to right and left. We must imagine that they're the only things in existence, so that if any of the lights moves, you can relate that movement only to the remaining lights.

Let us next suppose that the lights are arranged at equal intervals and, for convenience's sake, let's call those intervals one mile. Let's imagine ourselves microbes attached to one of the lights, which we will call Light-O (for both zero and "observer"), and that from that light we are capable of observing all the others.

To one side we see all the eastern lights and can measure their distances. The nearest one, one mile away is E-1; the next one, two miles away is E-2; the next one, three miles away is E-3, and so on as high as you like — to E-1,000,000 or more, if you wish. (If the lights are in a straight line, then the first one blocks all the rest, of course, but we can pretend, for argument's sake, that they are all transparent and that we can concentrate on any one of them, ignoring those in front of it.)

In the other direction, we have the western lights and we can number and identify them in the same way: W-1, W-2, W-3, and so on, as high as you like.

We can define the positions in which the lights are placed by using small letters. Light E-1 is in position e-1; Light W-5 is in position w-5 and so on.

Now comes the crucial point. Let us suppose that in the course of some interval of time (for convenience's sake, let us say, in one second) the interval of space between each pair of neighboring lights doubles, and changes from 1 mile to 2 miles. In other words, the line of lights expands linearly.

Since only the lights exist, there is nothing to which to compare the motions of any light except the other lights. You, on your Light-O, will

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have no sense of motion. You will feel motionless, but you will see that E-1 has moved off to position e-2 and that W-1 has moved off to position w-2, each of them having receded from you at the not unbelievable speed of 1 mile per second.

This is precisely the situation all along the line of lights. An observer of *any* of the lights will see only a slow recession on the part of his immediate neighbors. Though the line is a sextillion miles long and there are a sextillion lights at one-mile intervals and though every single interval between all those lights has expanded from one mile to two miles in one second, an observer on every single one of those lights would be conscious of only a slow recession on the part of his immediate neighbors.

Of course, if an observer is standing somewhere else and could see the entire sextillion-mile string of lights as a whole and saw the intervals all expand, it would be plain to him that in one second the length of the entire line had increased from one sextillion miles to two sextillion miles and that some of those lights would therefore have had to move at many millions of times the speed of light.

However, there can't be an outside observer since we are assuming that only the lights exist and that observers can only be on the lights (or, at a pinch, anywhere on the straight line between the lights). And even if an outside observer did exist, the rules of relativity would prevent him from seeing the entire stretch of line at one time.

But suppose that while standing on Light-O you observe, not just the neighboring lights, but all the rest as well. We have assumed this could be done.

Looking eastward from Light-O, you see that E-1 has moved from position e-1 to e-2. E-2, on the other hand, which is now separated from you by two 2-mile intervals instead of two 1-mile intervals, has moved from e-2 to e-4. E-3, separated from you by three 2-mile intervals, has moved from e-3 to e-6; E-4 has moved from e-4 to e-8; E-5 from e-5 to e-10, and so on indefinitely. Looking westward, you see that W-1 has moved from w-1 to w-2; W-2 from w-2 to w-4, and so on indefinitely.

Taking note of positions before and after, and knowing the time interval in which that change has taken place, you decide that since E-1 has moved from e-1 to e-2, it has receded from you at 1 mile per second. Since E-2 has moved from e-2 to e-4, it has receded from you at 2 miles per second. Since E-3 has moved from e-3 to e-6, it has receded from you at 3 miles per second, and so on, indefinitely. The same thing is happening to the western lights.

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Because of the constant expansion of the line, the conversion of every interval to one that is double its previous length, an observer at Light-O finds not only that every other light, in either direction, is receding from him, but that *the rate of recession is proportional to the distance from him.*

We can argue conversely. Suppose the observer knows nothing about the expansion of the line. All he knows is that by measuring the motion of the lights in either direction, he finds that all are receding from him and that the rate of recession is proportional to the distance from him. Having observed that, he must inevitably come to the conclusion that the line is expanding.

These same observations would be made, and these same conclusions would be arrived at, *no matter which light the observer was standing on.* Light-O is not a unique light because all the others are receding from it. Other observers on any other light would find themselves in the same "unique" position.

Next, let us suppose that the speed of light is exactly 186,282 miles per second (omitting the extra 0.4 miles per second). We can say then that by the line of argument worked out just above, an observer on Light-O would find E-186,282 (or W-186,282) to be receding from him at the speed of light; and that E-186,283 (or W-186,283) and all the lights beyond in either direction would be receding from him at speeds *above* the speed of light.

But how can this be? Doesn't Einstein say that nothing can go faster than light?

No, he doesn't. That's an over-simplification. What Einstein says is that whenever you *measure* a velocity relative to yourself, it turns out to be less than the speed of light.

We agree that light E-186,283 must recede from Light-O at a speed greater than the speed of light, but that's a *calculated* speed worked out by logic. Can the speed actually be *measured?*

Suppose we are on Light-O, observing all the other lights. We actually measure the speed of their recession by means of the red-shift in their spectra. The light a receding object emits shows a red-shift because there is a loss in energy in that light from the normal level in the light that the object would be emitting if it were motionless relative to you. The further the light, and the more rapidly it is receding, the greater the red-shift in the light it emits and the greater the energy loss.

Finally, by the time we observe E-186,282 (or W-186,282), the light it is

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emitting as it recedes from us at the speed of light shows an infinite red-shift, a *total* loss of energy. There is no light to reach us. In other words, in the case of an expanding line, we can only detect light, and therefore only measure speeds of recession up to the point where an object is receding at the speed of light. Beyond that we cannot possibly see or measure anything. For the line of lights we have postulated, E-186,282 and W-186,282 are the limits of the "observable Universe" for any observer on Light-O.

Beyond that end there are, of course, other lights, perhaps, for all we know, an infinite number of them. But we can never see them. And while we can calculate that, relative to ourselves, they are moving at more than the speed of light, to any observer that can see them and *measure* their speeds of recession, they would be moving at less than the speed of light.

In fact, from every light in the entire string, there is an observable Universe with limits slightly different from that which can be observed from every other light.

All of this, which I have worked out for a one-dimensional Universe of lights, works out also for the familiar three-dimensional Universe of galaxies in which we live.

The Universe is expanding at a constant rate. Each galaxy seems motionless to itself, and to each galaxy, the neighboring galaxies (or clusters of galaxies) seem to be receding at rates that are not too rapid. From each galaxy, the rate of recession of the other galaxies is seen to be increasing in direct proportion to the distance from the observer's galaxy. Furthermore, for each galaxy there is a limit marking off the observable Universe at that point where the galactic speed of recession is equal to the speed of light.

There may be an infinite number of galaxies beyond that limit, all of them moving faster than light relative to ourselves. Neither Einstein nor I care if there are. Those faster-than-light speeds cannot be measured and those faster-than-light galaxies cannot be detected.

The latest observations of galactic recessions make it look as though the rate of recession increases 15 miles per second every million light-years of distance from us. That means that at a distance of 12,500 million light-years, the speed of recession is 12,500 X 15, or just about equal to the speed of light.

The radius of the observable Universe, then, is 12,500 million light-years and its diameter is 25,000 million light-years. Since we have

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now detected a quasar at almost this limit (which is receding from us at roughtly 90 percent the speed of light), we cannot expect to see farther by more than a trivial amount. (That is why the newspapers spoke of astronomers having detected the end of the Universe.)

Unless —

Well, the Greeks came to a halt in 150 B.C. since they had probed the Universe as far as it was possible to go without a telescope (the name of the device meaning "to see the distant"). There is nothing mysterious about a telescope, but it was inconceivable to the Greeks, and if we could put ourselves in their place, we might feel justified to suppose that any distance beyond that of the Moon was forever inaccessible to the human mind.

Can it be that we have now merely probed the Universe as far as it is possible to go without a "tachyscope" ("to see the very fast"). Perhaps there is nothing mysterious about a tachyscope, once it is devised, but right now it seems inconceivable to us. Right now, we seem to be justified in feeling that the distance of anything beyond Quasar OH471 is forever inaccessible to the human mind.

— But perhaps we're wrong, too.

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In which the Army Corps of Engineers completes its ultimate project, the draining of Lake Erie to provide a home for urban minorities...

Not A Red Cent

by ROBIN SCOTT WILSON

The day in May they pulled the plug on Lake Erie, I covered the ceremonies at Niagara Falls for the *Chicago Sun Times*. It was wall-to-wall Mounties and Secret Service types between the press box and the little shed covered with bunting and maple leaves in which the President and the Prime Minister, hand on hand, threw the switch that detonated the charge that blasted the seventy-foot-deep channel that let the fetid waters of the lake drain into Lake Ontario and out the St. Lawrence Seaway and into the Atlantic. Of course, it wasn't really that simple. The blast removed only the last, lakeside barrier; the rest of the channel had been built months before, as had the new locks on the Welland Canal and at Detroit and the miles of deep-dredged channel to carry shipping to the old ports, to Buffalo and Cleveland and Toledo and Erie and Port Stanley and Port Colborne. And, of course, the water didn't all go in a rush. The Army Corps of Engineers figured that with luck they could drain the basin down to the banks of the new Erie River in about two years, provided there wasn't too much winter precipitation around the upper lakes and the Chicago Ship and Sanitary Canal could double its flow south into the Mississippi.

But it was A Moment in History, and I covered it and filed my dispatches (Copyright © Field Enterprises), and because Ed Laughlin, my managing editor, knew I had been going through a bad patch that spring, he more or less ordered me to stay on the story. And so I hung around off and on the rest of the summer to see what the declining water level would

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reveal and to wrestle some of my private devils. Me and about twenty other people from the wire services and the major midwestern dailies.

Well, there were more futile Angry Outcries from former riparian rights owners, and I reported that. Then there were the water table problems in northern Ohio, and I reported that. I even went to Washington to cover the "Restore the Lake" effort in the House, and what I reported on that was headlined: "'New Populists' Steamroller House Lake Debate." But most of the time I sat with my colleagues through that hot summer on the little bargelike craft the Corps had provided the press and looked at the mud flats and smelled the stench and reported *that.* It was not one of your enviable assignments, that summer on the diminishing lake; and I longed for my old beat in Chicago, found myself curiously homesick for Junior Daly's manipulations in City Hall, the nightly take of corpses out of the Calumet River, and of course the big story that summer, the Republican National Convention in the McCormick Place Convention Hall. I quite frankly didn't give a damn about what was happening to the lake, and contrary to Ed's expectations I didn't find the peace and isolation particularly conducive to settling my own problems, which were not so much insoluble as they were vague and amorphous, the kind of anomie (I know now) that hits men when they turn thirty, have yet to replace vanished ideals and don't know either who they are or where they're going.

I bitched a lot on the telephone to Ed. "My Lord, Ed. How many column inches on *mud* can you use?" I said about twice a week.

"Hang in there, Jake," he said about twice a week. "You are witnessing one of The Great Engineering Feats of Our Time and the readers of the *Sun Times,* Chicago's Most Progressive Daily Newspaper, have gotta follow it, like closely. And anyway, the boss is on the International Great Lakes Commission, and *he* wants to follow it closely."

"But, Ed, for Chrissakes. Nothing but mud as far as the eye can see. Mud and stinking algae and dead fish and rusted chunks of old ore boats..."

"Great stuff, Jake! I'll get rewrite for you. That's Pulitzer prose, man!" And he hung up.

And so we sat there and drank coffee in the morning and beer in the afternoon and whisky in the evening and threw the grounds and the cans and the bottles into the mud, and every day the Corps winched the barge out another hundred feet or so, and every once in a while we'd take a helicopter ride north until we could see the

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Royal Canadian Engineers' barge winching out from Leamington, off across the increasingly muddy horizon.

By mid-August, things began to pick up. The Corps was air-seeding the mud with pellets of buffalo grass and fertilizer, although God knows they didn't need the fertilizer; the stuff seemed to sprout the instant it hit, and before long the mud had a green haze across it. And as soon as they could get around on it, all kinds of scientists began to poke around: icthyologists looking at bottom specimens, botanists testing the new plant life, anthropologists digging around for early American artifacts and remnants of the rich Indian civilization — the five tribes of the Iroquois and the neutrals — that had once flourished around the lake. About this time, during one of my semi-weekly bitch sessions, Ed said, "Look, why don't you get off your red ass and do a piece on what the anthropologists or archeologists or whatever are turning up? You're an Indian, aren't you? 'Jake Cornplanter' sure as hell ain't no Anglicized Polish moniker."

"Yeah. Okay. I'll do a story on what they've turned up that belonged to my great-great aunt Running Doe. Or whatever." I hated ethnic pieces, although as a Chicago reporter I suppose I should have been hardened to them. Maybe it was because as a kid if you weren't an Italian or a Pole or if your folks didn't belong to the Sons of Slovakia, you were nothing; if you didn't live in Kenilworth or have an ashy smear on your forehead at Easter or get out of school on Yom Kippur or your old man didn't sit around in the *Stube* on Saturday night drinking Löwenbrau and playing *skat,* you were nothing. I remember when I was about fourteen asking my father, "Why can't we all be just Chicagoans or Americans or, for Chrissakes, just *people?*" and him shrugging and looking away and saying only, "Please, Jacob, don't curse."

But I *was* hardened to ethnic pieces, I guess, and so off I went into the greening mudflats to talk to a bearded professor from Cleveland State and his crew of short-haired students slopping around in the gluck, collecting arrowheads and ancestral bones and chunks of old canoes, remarkably well-preserved in the sediment. I've a copy of the *Sun Times* story I filed. The lead paragraph read like this:

"Erieland, August 17, 1988 (AP). Indian civilization around the shores of Lake Erie was apparently much richer than historians have thought. The number of indian artifacts in a remarkable state of preservation being turned up by

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archeologists suggests that the population of Eries, Neutrals, Miamis, and the Iroquois who later replaced them, may have been several times greater than the history books report. According to Prof. David O. Solomon, head of one of several archeological investigations now being conducted in the newly revealed lake bottom, the onslaught of white settlements in the late 18th Century drove the Iroquois into a life more centered on aquaculture — fishing — than they hitherto had led. 'It is ironic,' said Prof. Solomon, 'that the construction of Erieland, destined to be a haven of rich farmland for urban blacks and other minorities, was once the last refuge of yet another American minority, the Iroquois."

Given all the furor at the convention about Democratic-populist inroads among traditional Republican supporters, the piece went well, and the Associated Press syndicated it, which produced a nice little bonus in my monthly check. Ed called a week later: "Those archeologists still there, Jake?"

"All over the place. The Corps is getting mad at them for trampling down the buffalo grass."

"Well, do me another piece, and see if you can come up with an angle on why the blacks and chicanos and all don't seem to be trampling down the door at the Erieland Resettlement Office."

"Well, hell, Ed. You know as well as I do. This whole thing is just an election year boondoggle. What makes those creeps in Washington think a guy in the ghetto is going to be satisfied with a mule and a plow and a sack of seed? Jesus! This is 1988, not 1888!"

"Yeah, I know. But do me another ethnic point-of-view piece. You know. We'll by-line it 'Jacob Cornplanter gives the minority point of view.'"

I said "yech" and he said AP was waiting for it and didn't I like the fatter paycheck and I said not that much and he said he was thinking of moving Mary Redcloud up to a job in rewrite, and since Mary and I had been a couple of years apart at Northwestern and had a kind of understanding about someday, I said okay and put on my mudshoes and went out to hunt up Professor Solomon.

Coated with mud and whisps of buffalo grass, he was a study in pointillism. "Why aren't the blacks much interested in Erieland? I don't know. I'm no sociologist. But I have a hunch. I think the National Science Foundation and the Corps of Engineers and maybe the Populists in Congress think of Erieland as a kind of black man's Israel. But the black man, he doesn't see himself that way. He

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wants what he sees around him. He sits there in the Hough District and wants to live in Shaker Heights. He doesn't have what one of my colleagues at the university calls 'the diaspora syndrome.' But then I'm a cultural anthropologist, not a social psychologist, and I don't know much about these things."

I nodded and took notes. Solomon wasn't giving me answers, but he was giving me the kind of speculative stuff the syndicates like to throw at their Sunday readers. He looked at me a bit quizzically and then beckoned me in out of the shimmering August heat to the styrofoam beer coolers in his plastic geodesic headquarters. "Look here, Mr. Cornplanter, you're an Amerind, I would guess."

I nodded.

"Okay, I'm a Jew, I know what Stanley Bloomfield is talking about with his 'diaspora syndrome.' You see some touches of it among the blacks: the popularity of Swahili and Hausa on college campuses, the fact that black kids have been wearing the Afro and dashikis for the past twenty-five years or so. But when they grow older, they assimilate in a society that is every bit as much theirs as it is any white man's. They look for some *cultural* identification with Africa, but no *territorial* identification. It's the difference between *home* and *homeland.*" Solomon was settling into what I guess was his classroom lecture style, and suddenly he stopped, a bit embarrassed. He glanced down at a box of bones next to the beer cooler. "Sorry, I guess you can take the professor out of the classroom but not the classroom out of the professor."

"No. Please go ahead. It's good stuff. You're giving me a good column."

"All right, but let's have a beer. Maybe it will settle the chalk dust." He popped a couple of tops, handed me one, sipped his, and went on. "Well, look. Take the Jews. Some feel the old longing, but let's face it, they buy bonds for Israel but, like my old mother down in Miami says, 'That's a place, who wants to go there to live?' You take your other ethnic groups, even the white Anglo-Saxon protestants, they're basically European-centered and they go to the grandfather's village in Kent or in Slovenia or in Tuscany and they poke around and try to remember some of the old words, but, man, it's a *holiday* for them. After two or three weeks they can't wait for Pan Am to bring them back to the land of round doorknobs and Colonel Sanders. Whatever it is — Liverpool or County Cork or Naples or the Ukraine, it isn't *home.*"

He wiped foam from his little mustache and popped open another can of Schlitz, the beer that

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made Milwaukee famous, while I scribbled to catch up with him. "Now you Indians," he continued, "don't you ever sort of long for the good old days when all this real estate belonged to you?" He swept his free hand to take in the old shoreline, blue in the distance through the dome door.

"Not me," I said. "Maybe some of the old people on the reservation talk about it, talk about the land before it belonged to *any*one, but I think they're just parroting words that came down to them from *their* old folks."

Solomon looked up at me from over his beer can. "Are you sure they're just parroting words?"

I shrugged. "Hell, I don't know. My folks left the reservation back in '68, when I was just a little kid. The Chicago public schools and five years at Northwestern took all the Indian out of me. I guess I don't know what the people back at Kinzua think."

And that's as far as I got that summer. I filed my dispatches and wrote a lot of stuff I didn't believe about ethnic identity and about the American longing for the homeland and AP ran it as a Sunday feature and I was asked to do a special piece for the Op Ed section of the *New York Times* and people began to talk about me as the new Vine Deloria. The Corps shut down operations for the fall rainy season and the winter snowy season and I went back to Chicago and gave up wrestling with my anomie and married Mary Redcloud that fall and at Christmas I took her to see my folks at Salamanca, near the Allegheny reservation, in upstate New York, where dad had retired after thirty years with the American Bridge Company. Mary's people were Potawatomis from up around Green Bay, but Northwestern had taken all the Indian out of her, too, and she didn't miss it any more than I did. Not then, anyway.

But something happened to us at Salamanca. First there was dad. He'd been active in the Indian Nationalist Movement back in the fifties and sixties, along with the St. Regis Mohawks, and although an ailing wife and six hungry kids had taken him off to Chicago and a lifetime of high steel work, when he retired all the old political fire came back into him. He was simply a whole lot more *Indian* than I could ever remember him being back at Archer and Kedzie.

Then there was the Christmas Eve service in the reservation long house with this pale young priest from Warren who was studying anthropology and who read the epistle in Iroquois. It hit me somewhere, even though I had no strong feelings about Christianity in general or the Episcopal Church

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in particular. The contrast, I guess. Me hating what he was doing, seeing condescension in it, and the old people really eating it up. I tried to explain my mixed feelings to Mary, afterward, lying in the snug dark of the little lean-to addition on the back of dad's old frame house, the winter cold and sterile outside our window.

"I mean, if they're going to hang onto the old ways, the language and all, why don't they hang onto *all* the old ways? It's the mixture, I guess, that gets to me. 'Great White Father in sky speaks to noble savage in his own tongue.' Crap. I say it's all crap!"

Mary bit my ear and laughed. "Squaw say she never see big handsome buck so uptight before. Gee, honey, what's it matter? If the old folks get a charge out of it, what's it matter?"

"I don't know. I don't know why it gets to me. But it does."

I shook myself out of the mood and we made love and it was better than it had been. It was a few minutes away from uncertainty and disillusionment when I knew precisely who and what I was and what I was doing and why. And then I lay there with Mary's glossy black hair splayed across my chest and stared out the window into the snowy moonlight and thought about sacred and profane love and the English of the Book of Common Prayer and some Iroquois words I remembered from my childhood (my grandfather, a tall, thin man who might have posed for the old nickel chanting them in an earlier, poorer long house) and I thought of the guy who said he didn't mind being a grandfather but wasn't wild about being married to a grandmother. And then I slept.

The next morning I called Ed and got a three-week leave for me and Mary. "Indian stuff?" he asked. "Yeah," I said. He grunted and said, "Okay, do me a feature on it. There's talk of a Pulitzer nomination."

I wanted the time off so that we could stay for the New Year's celebrations, the "Boiling of the Babies" when every kid born in the previous six months gets his name, and the dances: the Huskface and Mask ceremonies, the White Dog sacrifice. It is a good time and I wanted Mary to see it and I wanted to see it again, as I had not for over twenty years. I wanted to see if I could remember something, understand myself a little better.

But I might as well have been covering the blessing of the Infant of Prague at Cicero and Cermak for all the bells it rang in me. At least then. I found no new insights, understood myself no better, and we returned to Chicago and in March bought a little house out in Oak Park and I put in a lawn and

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Mary planted some flowers and nothing did very well and I continued to wonder (without putting it in those words) where in hell an alien was supposed to go to register. I lost myself in the work of a big city journalist, writing up the corpses in the Calumet River (who remained, most often, comfortably unidentified) and Junior Daly's shenanigans and the spring riots in Hyde Park. Mary hid out in the city room too until the combination of morning sickness and an inability to shove what we were thinking of as Jake Junior under a typewriter stand forced her to stay at home to do battle with the neighbors and the Japanese beetles.

And it wasn't until the Corps began operations again in June and I was back on the barge for a few days that it began to hit me, that I began to see the difference between *home* and *homeland* and what an Indian was and, just maybe, what I was, beside an upcoming young journalist who had won a Pulitzer in his sixth year as a reporter for writing a lot of ethnic prose he had not believed in when he wrote it but was now beginning to wonder about.

The buffalo grass had come up high and strong during the spring, and everywhere you looked you could see thick young shoots of elm and maple and oak. "It'll be a goddamn wilderness out here in a couple of years if they don't start plowing soon," said old Peter Empers of the *Plain Dealer*. "Nine thousand square miles of the richest damn land in North America." Pete had been a farm boy in Missouri, and you could see his hands itch for the hoe and the plow handle.

I looked out across the grass and scrub to Solomon's geodesic, almost hidden in the new growth, although he had moved it in just the week before. "Maybe that's it," I said half to myself, half to Pete.

"What's it?" he asked as I tossed my half-full beer can over the side and scrambled after.

"Maybe that's what an Indian is," I said, not caring if he understand, or even heard. "Maybe an Indian is wilderness, like a Jew is Israel." I didn't look back, so intent was I on talking with Solomon. And then, after Solomon and his laughter, his sudden seriousness, his look of admiration, almost envy, it was the long drive to Salamanca and dad and the chiefs, called to a quick session. And then it was Washington and Holly Irving, the best constitutional lawyer anyone could put me on to, and then filing the papers, and then, out of loyalty to Ed and the *Sun Times*, the long-distance call to rewrite:

"Headline: Indians File Suit for Erieland. By-line: Jacob Ha-Wa-

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Ke-Na paren Cornplanter paren, Begin text. Interior Department officials today refused to comment publicly on a suit filed by the five tribes of the Iroquois Nation before the First Federal District Court claiming all rights in fee simple to new lands created by the current Erieland project of the Army Corps of Engineers. But privately, Department spokesmen voiced their fear that the Indian claim would probably be upheld in the courts.

"Meanwhile, in Salamanca, New York, site of the Allegheny reservation, tribal spokesmen Harold Cornplanter, 68, expressed the feelings of the Iroquois group on whose behalf the suit was filed.

"'We have no intention of farming the land or allowing others to do so. We do not see Erieland as an area for economic exploitation but as a land of virgin wilderness open to all Americans who will respect God's creation and the Indian's identification with it.'

"In Washington, noted constitutional authority C. Hollis Irving, who has filed an amicus curiae brief with the federal court, said: 'There can be no doubt as to the validity of the Iroquois claim. Not only is there a long succession of treaties between the Iroquois Nation and both the U.S. and Canadian governments, but we have a determining precedent in the 1970 Supreme Court decision which gave final title to the bed of the Arkansas River to the Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws.'

"Reached at his home on the Mohawk reservation near St. Regis, New York, Iroquois Chief Samuel Bendingstave, 72, said: 'I can add not much to what Cornplanter has told you. Where there is wilderness, there belongs the Indian. They tell me that Erieland will be a new wilderness in a few years. There will be the Indian's homeland, even though he may not chose to live there.' End text."

But I still didn't know everything. Only a couple of years later did it all come home to me. Mary and I and Jacqueline (who was what "Jake, Junior" had turned out to be) were at our camp about thirty miles north of Lorain, Ohio, along the west bank of the canal draining the Black River. It was one of those soft July evenings when the thick new clumps of larch are barely shivering in the beginnings of the night breeze. A black man came gliding up the canal in a gleaming new Chris Craft, governed down to the Erieland limit of ten horsepower, and tied up at our pier. The boat was gunwale-deep in glossy camping gear and kids. "Hey, man," he said, "you an Indian?"

"Yeah."

"It okay if we camp on down a

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ways here? Man at the gate, he say it okay. He say all this land isn't belong to nobody."

"He's right. All you have to do is clean up when you leave, or they won't let you come back another time."

"Sheeeit, man. And it all for free?"

"Yep. Won't cost you a red cent."

He stepped closer, a wide grin on his face, and I saw what I am embarrassed to say I had not assumed: he was no Steppin Fetchit. "That's pretty good," he said, seeing a wit in my comment about a red cent I had not intended, displaying a good nature and intelligence that had been masked by his black English. He reached for my hand and shook it. "Free," he said, smiling.

"Free," I said, chuckling with him and with the sound of the larches and the water in the canal and the beginning night wind and the kids in the boat with their eternal cry, "Hey mom, when are we gonna *get* there."

Coming Soon

The brand-new positronic robot story by Isaac Asimov that we mentioned a couple of months ago will be along soon, most probably in an early Spring issue. Also planned for Spring is a Special Robert Silverberg Issue with a stunning new novella from Mr. Silverberg plus the usual added attractions. Meanwhile, our inventory looks just fine, thank you: new stories from Robert Aickman, R. Bretnor, Barry N. Malzberg, Harry Harrison, Manly Wade Wellman, Brian W. Aldiss and many other favorites are on hand. This is a fine time to use the coupon on page 157 to enter subscriptions for yourself and your friends at the special Christmas rates.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 6

In the August issue we asked for competitors to submit bawdy limericks relating to sf works, and the response proved that F&SF readers are up to any challenge. Which reminds us to mention again that ideas for these competitions are most welcome. This month's winners:

FIRST PRIZE: *Janice W. Leffingwell*

Our robot detective, Daneel,
Has oft been mistaken for real,
A lass on Aurora,
Who offered her flora,
Learned all about case-hardened steel.
(*Apologies to the Good Doctor*)

SECOND PRIZE: *Margaret O. Ablitt*

An ecdysiast on the Corso
Has a topological torso.
Her Moebius strip
Is well worth the trip
But her trefoil-like grinds are much more so.
(*C. M. Kornbluth's "The Unfortunate Topologist"*)

RUNNERS UP:

Her bare bosom suddenly fell;
Conan, surprised, said, "Oh hell!"
My sexual power
Has damaged this flower!"
(She had really passed out from the smell.)
—*Randy Morse*
(*Robert E. Howard's Conan stories*)

The Gray Mouser and Fafhrd, undaunted,
Into Ahriman's haunted realm jaunted;
But it did queer their plan
When they found that a man
Was the girl who the two of them wanted.
—*Ralph C. Glisson*
(*Fritz Leiber's "Adept's Gambit"*)

COMPETITION 7 (*suggested by Philip Cohen*)

Time to move on to a more high-level, complex sort of test we felt, like this one suggested by Mr. Cohen. For competition 7: give a lexicon of 10 or fewer words

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from an alien language. The sample below is from Brian Aldiss's "Confluence."

BAGI RACK: Apologizing as a form of attack; a stick resembling a gun

BAG RACK: Needless and offensive apologies

HE YUP: The first words the computers spoke, meaning, "The light will not be necessary"

NOZ STAP SAN: A writer's attitude to fellow writers

JILY JIP TUP: A thinking machine that develops a stammer; the action of pulling up the trousers while running uphill

JIL JIPY TUP: Any machine with something incurable about it; pleasant laughter that is nevertheless unwelcome; the action of pulling up the trousers while running downhill

PI KI SKAB WE: The Parasite that afflicts man and Tig Gag in its various larval stages and, while burrowing in the brain of the Tig Gag, causes it to speak like a man

PI SHAK RACK CHANO: The retrogressive dreams of autumn attributed to the presence in the bloodstream of Pi Ki Skab We

SHAK ALE MAN: The struggle that takes place in the night between the urge to urinate and the urge to continue sleeping

SHAK LO MUN GRAM: When the urge to continue sleeping takes precedence over all things

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by December 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, *The Martian Chronicles,* (special illustrated edition) by Ray Bradbury (Doubleday $8.95). Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 7 will appear in the April issue.

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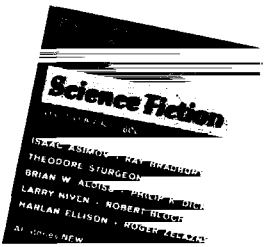

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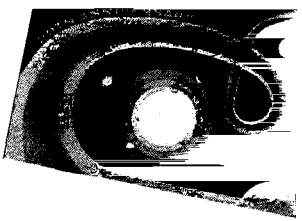

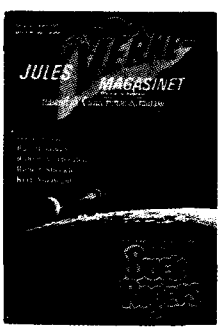

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